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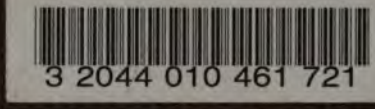

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WOMAN'S FRIENDSHIP;

A STORY OF DOMESTIC LIFE.

BY

GRACE AGUILAR,
AUTHOR OF "HOME INFLUENCE."

"To show us how divine a thing
A woman may be made."
WORDSWORTH.

NEW-YORK:
D. APPLETON & COMPANY,
443 & 445 BROADWAY.
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WOMAN'S FRIENDSHIP.

CHAPTER I.

FRIENDSHIP DEMANDS EQUALITY OF STATION.—TRUE AFFECTION DEVOID OF SELFISHNESS.

"BEWARE, dear Florence; I fear this warm attachmen must end in disappointment, fully as I can sympathize in its present happiness," was the warning address of Mrs. Leslie to an animated girl, who, on the receipt of a note and its rapid perusal, had bounded towards her mother with an exclamation of irrepressible joy.

"Disappointment, dearest mother! How can that be?" was her eager reply.

"Because friendship, even more than love, demands equality of station. Friends cannot be to each other what they ought to be, if the rank of one party be among the nobles of the land, that of the other lowly as your own.

"And so I told her, dear mother; at least so my manner must have said, for she once called me a silly girl to be so terrified at rank, and asked me if I fancied, because 'Lady' was prefixed to her name, it raised up an impassable barrier between Ida Villiers and Florence Leslie. I loved her from that moment."

"No doubt," replied her mother, smiling. "Yet, my Florence, I wish the first friendship your warm heart had formed had been with some other than its present object. You do not know how often I have longed for you to find a friend of your own sex, and nearly of your own age, on whom to expend some of those ever-gushing affections you lavish so warmly on me and Minie—"

"And my father and Walter, do I not love them?"

laughingly interrupted Florence, kneeling down to caress her mother as she spoke.

"Nay, if I must enumerate all whom Florence loves, I believe we must add Minie's kitten and Walter's greyhound, and all the mute animals which come to her for protection and care," rejoined Mrs. Leslie in the same tone; "but, nevertheless, I have longed for you to find a friend, because I feel you stand almost alone."

"Alone, mother! with you and Minie? How can you speak so? Have I ever wished or sought another?"

"No, love; but that is no reason why your mother should not wish it for you. Minie is a pet, a plaything for us all, younger in looks and manner than thirteen years may justify, and no companion for your present pursuits and opening pleasures."

"But are not you—"

"I cannot be to you all I wish, my warm-hearted girl, or all your fancy pictures me," replied Mrs. Leslie, with difficulty suppressing emotion; "confined as I am, almost continually, to a sofa or bed; often incapacitated from the smallest exertion, even from hearing the gay laughter of my children; my sufferings are aggravated by the painful thought, that now you need female companionship and sympathy more than ever, I cannot give them. A few years ago you were still a child, and your natural lightheartedness bore you up against all that might seem melancholy in your home. But within the last year I have observed that my sufferings have too often infected you with more sadness than they inflict upon me; and continually to watch with me, and to bear with me, and think for me, this is no task for you, my Florence."

"I. is so precious even in its sorrow, that I would not resign it for any thing that other friends might offer, dearest mother. It is only the last two years I have been conscious of all I owe to you, and all you endure, and all the trouble and sadness my wilfulness must often have occasioned you. And if I have seemed more thoughtful and serious, it is because I have only now begun to think and feel."

"And for that very reason, my child, I have wished you to find some friend, whose affection and personal character

might sometimes give you more cheerful matters of meditation, and a happy change of scene. You are only too prone to think and feel, and might become morbidly sensitive before either of us had imagined the danger. I know, too, that there is an age when the young require more than their natural relatives whom to respect and love; they fancy it no credit to be loved merely in their domestic circle; they need an interchange of sentiment and pursuit, and all their innocent recreations and graver duties acquire double zest from being shared by another. Sympathy is the magic charm of life; and a friend will both give it, and feel it, and never shrink from speaking truth, however painful, kindly indeed, but faithfully, and will infuse and receive strength by the mutual confidence of high and religious principle. Trust me, there are such friends, my Florence, friends that will cling to each other through weal and through woe, who will never permit coldness or distrust to creep in, and dull their truth; aye, and who will stand by, protecting and comforting, should sorrow or even sin be the lot of the one, and that of the other be happiness complete."

Mrs. Leslie ceased, her voice becoming almost inaudible from emotion or exhaustion. Florence imagined the latter cause, for their was a deep flush on her mother's usually pallid cheek which alarmed and pained her, and throwing her arms around her neck, she begged her not to talk too much, dearly as she loved to hear her, adding somewhat mournfully, "You have indeed pictured true friendship, mother, and that which I yearn for; Lady Ida may be all this to me, but I am too lowly in station and in merit to be such to her; though I do feel I could go to the world's end to make her happier than she is. Oh, mother, if you did but know her as I do."

"Without that pleasure, my dear child, I have seen enough of her to know that, were her rank less high, I could not wish a dearer, truer friend for Florence. A character like yours, almost too clinging, too affectionate, needs the support of firmness and self-control, qualities I have never seen possessed in a more powerful degree than by Lady Ida. But remember, my Florence, it is not only the disparity of rank which must eventually separate you

Lady Ida is about to leave England to reside in Italy for an indefinite time."

"And with my whole heart I wish she could set off directly, lonely as I should feel," exclaimed Florence eagerly.

"No doubt you do; for there never was any selfishness in true affection, be it friendship or love. Yet still I wish there had been no occasion for this self-renunciation, and that your first friendship had not been with one from whom you will so soon be called upon to part."

"But I would not lose the pleasure of the present to escape the pain of the future. You know, dear mother, I always say I feel that pleasure and pain are twins; I never feel one without the other, and I should be a poor miserable being, without a particle of spirit or animation, if I were to give up the joy of the one feeling for fear of the suffering of the other."

There was an indefinable expression of sadness on the countenance of Mrs. Leslie as her mild eye rested on the beaming features of her child. It was an expression which others might often have remarked, but when observed by Florence she believed it natural to those beloved features, marking perhaps greater suffering of body than usual, and in consequence calling forth increased tenderness on her part.

"It is too late to wish the present pleasure recalled, my child: continue to love Lady Ida, only remember there must be a cloud in your horizon of joy, that this intimacy cannot last, even if she return to England. Your respective stations cannot permit the confidence of perfect friendship, and my Florence has too much of her mother's pride to seek to be a *humble* friend."

"I could never be such to Lady Ida," replied Florence, "for she would cease to love me, or at least to feel the same interest in me, if I were. No, mother, no; I am not ashamed to stand in a lower grade than hers. I shall never become one of those despicable characters, who, attempting to rise above, sink lower than their natural station, and thus expose themselves to laughter and contempt."

CHAPTER II.

THE LESLIE FAMILY.—A MYSTERY.—LOVE OF COUNTRY AFFECTED BY ASSOCIATIONS.

THE family, of whom the animated speaker of the preceding chapter formed so engaging a part, consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Leslie and their three children. They had resided for several years in the lovely little village of Babbicombe, situated on the south coast of Devonshire. Occasional visits had indeed been made to the metropolis, and other parts of England; but their home was Devonshire, and there had the affections of Florence taken root, with all the enthusiasm of her nature. London she abhorred; she fancied its denizens were cold and heartless, and her mind had not yet received the magic touch which could awaken it to those treasures of art and science which the emporium of England's glory so richly contains. As yet, the music of the birds and streams, and the deeper base and varied tones of Ocean, were sweeter harmonies than the rarest talent of the capital. The opening flowers, the diversified scene of hill and dale, the groups of village children, of sturdy peasants and rustic girls, amid the fields and orchards, presented to her fancy lovelier pictures and more perfect forms than the finest galleries of art.

The feelings and mysteries of her own loving heart and simple mind presented enough variety; she needed not change of society to develop her intuitive perception of character. Reading with avidity all that she could obtain —history, poetry, romance, all that could delineate nature according to the responses of her own heart—she needed no other recreation. The gentle counsels of Mrs. Leslie preserved her from all that mawkish sentiment and undue prominence of romance which in some dispositions might have resulted from such indiscriminate reading at an age so early. But Florence Leslie was no heroine, to take a volume of Byron or Moore, and wander alone amid the rocks, and fells, and woods of Babbicombe, and weep in

secret, imagining herself to be some lovelorn damsel, and pining for all the fascinating heroes of whom she read. That she was often seen tripping lightly, on an early summer morning, or a cool fresh evening, down the hill to a favorite cleft in a rock almost hidden by luxuriant brushwood which covered it, and within hearing of the sonorous voice of old Ocean, and seen too with a book in her hand, we pretend not to deny. But look not aghast, ye votaries of Byron and Moore, that volume was generally one of Felicia Hemans, or Mary Howitt; or, if of deeper lore, Wordsworth, Coleridge, the stirring scenes of Scott, or the domestic pictures of Edgeworth, Mitford, or Austin. Florence was not yet old enough, or perchance wise enough, to appreciate the true poetic beauties of Lord Byron's thrilling lays, or the sweeter, softer music of Moore. She was as yet only sensible of that which pleased her fancy and touched her heart; and, therefore, to these poets her gentle spirit echoed no reply.

But Florence was not so wedded to her books, and shrubs, and flowers, as to eschew those pleasures which might perhaps appear somewhat irrelevant to such a quiet life. No one loved a ball so well, no one was so lightly gay in all festivity and mirth. The morning hour might see her in tears over a favorite book, the evening find her the life and centre of a happy group of children, laughing, dancing, like the youngest there.

Such she was at the age of fifteen; seventeen years found this internal and external happiness somewhat clouded She became more awake to outward things—to the consciousness of, and sympathy with, the sufferings of a mother whom she loved with no common love. For the last five years, Mrs. Leslie had been laboring under an incurable disease, which not only always debilitated her frame, producing a languor and depression under which many a mind would have sunk, but exposed her at intervals to the most excruciating suffering, which she would yet bear so uncomplainingly, so heroically, that very often the damp drops on her brow, or a fainting fit, would be the first sign that she was enduring pain. A sudden and violent disease would have alarmed, and thus excited the attention even of a child; but Mrs. Leslie's complaint

had crept on so silently and unsuspectedly, her languor and weakness were so successfully combatted, that it was not strange that Florence should have failed to observe them at first, and that when she did so, the fact should have dashed her glowing visions with a saddening shade. She felt the pleasures of gayety were alloyed, for she could never join in them with her mother.

True the yearning for something more to love was not strong enough to affect her happiness; for, when by Mrs. Leslie's side, listening to her loved counsels, or caressing her young and joyous sister Mary, (or Minie, as she was always called,) she felt it not. It was only when taking a ramble too long for Minie, or joining in the pleasures of evening society, for which Minie was too young, and which were for Mrs. Leslie too painful an exertion, that she was conscious she might be happier still.

There was an ardent longing in Florence Leslie's heart from her earliest years, which most people imagined but romantic folly engendered by indiscriminate reading, and a consequent love of adventure, but which (strange to say) always appeared to cause Mrs. Leslie some uneasiness. All that concerned Italy, from the driest history, the deepest antiquarian research, to the lightest poem, were pored over with a pertinacity, a constancy, which no one but Mr. and Mrs. Leslie, perhaps, could comprehend. Rogers's poem she committed to memory page after page, simply for recreation; and she learned to draw, chiefly in order to copy every print of Italy, modern or ancient, which came before her.

"What would not give to have some claim on that lovely land?" she had said one day, when only twelve years old. "It is so foolish merely to love. Now, if I had by some strange chance been born there, I might love Italy as much as I pleased. By the way, papa, where was I born? I have asked mamma several times, and ther seems a fatality attending her answer, for I do not know yet."

Mr. Leslie's face was shaded by his hand, and it was twilight, or Florence must have discovered that his countenance was slightly troubled; but he answered quietly, "If you so much wish to forswear poor old England as

your birthplace, my dear child, you have my permission so to do. For, in truth, if to be born in a country makes you a child of the soil, you are Italian, having first seen the light about twenty miles from the fair town whose name you bear."

"Italian! really, truly, Italian! Oh! you dear, good father, to tell me so. Now may I love it as much as I please. Italy, dear, beautiful Italy! I am your own child! Mamma, naughty mamma!" she continued, bounding to Mrs. Leslie, as she entered the room, "why did you never tell me I was Italian? I must go and tell Walter and nurse;" and away she flew, utterly unconscious of the agitation her words had produced in Mrs. Leslie, who, as the door closed behind her, sank on a chair by her husband's side faintly exclaiming,

"Edward, dearest Edward! what have you told her?"

"Nothing, dearest, trust me—nothing that can in any way disturb her serenity or happiness, or excite the least suspicion in herself or others, inimical to her present or future peace. I did but tell her she was born in Italy, which, did she ever mingle with my family, she would find many to confirm; and you know it is but the truth, dearest wife."

Mrs. Leslie breathed more freely.

"I am very weak and very foolish," she said, after a pause; "but the slightest reference to her birth utterly unnerves me. Dearest Edward, there come to me at times such horrible forebodings, as if we had scarcely done right to act as we have done; and, yet it was my own request, my first weighty boon, and not granted by you without a painful struggle; if there be fault—if evil come of it—I have brought it on myself.'

"Do not speak thus, my noble Mary," was her husband's instant reply, pressing her as he spoke to his bosom. "What fault can there be in acting as you did? What evil can come from it to dash your noble deed with woe?"

"If she should ever learn—" faintly murmured Mrs. Leslie; "ever know the truth—"

"It is not likely she ever will, nor can there be any need she should. Loved, cherished, aye, and dutiful and

affectionate as she is, God grant that she may never leave our home till she quits it for a happier one."

"Amen!" fervently responded Mrs. Leslie; and what further might have passed between them was checked by the re-entrance of their child.

As Florence outgrew the period of childhood, and merged into opening womanhood, there was something in the intense blackness of her large, lustrous eye, the glossy tresses of her long, jet-black hair, the rich complexion, which, though refined, and rendered peculiarly delicate from the effects of an English climate, was certainly more brunette than blonde, that seemed in truth to mark her of more southern origin than her mother and little sister, between whom and herself there was no affinity of feature whatever. Minie was a lovely English child, exquisitely fair, with deep blue eyes, and clustering curls of gold, and a voice that, even at twelve years old, was something so extraordinary in its compass, its flexibility, that many a professor might have envied her the gift.

Florence was no regular beauty, but very graceful, with a modest and winning manner, and an ever-varying expression of feature, which rendered her a most loveable creature. Flattery, Florence instinctively abhorred; but if any one told her her eyes and complexion were more Italian than English, she would be as innocently delighted as a child with a new toy.

The other child of Mr. and Mrs. Leslie was a delicate boy two years the junior of Florence, between whom and himself many an animated discussion was wont to take place, on what they termed the respective merits of their respective countries. On one of these occasions, Florence met the glance of her mother, full of that sorrowful meaning which she had only lately learned to remark, and she hastened towards her to cover her with caresses, and ask if she could do any thing to alleviate her pain.

"Mamma does not like to hear you abuse old England," was Walter's laughing rejoinder, as her mother assured her she was not suffering.

"I do not abuse it; I love it Walter; but I love Italy more, and mamma loves it too."

"Not better than England, Florence; not so well: look at her eyes."

Florence did look, and seemed disappointed; Mrs. Leslie smiled.

"I have passed many happy, but more sorrowful days in Italy, my dear children; and, as we generally love a country from association, I candidly own it would give me more pain than pleasure to visit those classic shores again."

"There!" exclaimed Walter, triumphantly.

"It is not likely I shall ever have the happiness of seeing them; so let me love on, at least," rejoined Florence, in a sorrowful tone.

CHAPTER III.

EFFECTS OF FASHIONABLE TRAINING.—THE STORY OPENS.

Among the many visitors to the mild and beautiful seaport of Torquay, was the family of Lord Melford, a nobleman, with whom Mr. Leslie, during his casual visits to the metropolis, had become acquainted, from having done him some essential service in the way of business. The climate of Devonshire having been recommended for the health of one of his daughters, two successive winters found the family comfortably domiciled in a noble residence near the town, acknowledged to be second only to Tor Abbey in importance, both for interior arrangements, and exterior beauty; its picturesque localities possessing all the varied charms of hill and dale, wood and water, peculiar to Devonshire.

Lady Melford and her daughters made it a point to return Mr. Leslie's services by attentions to that gentleman's family. Florence was not a being to be passed unnoticed. Her animation, her grace, her cultivated mind, and intuitive refinement, were acknowledged even by those accustomed to the most fashionable society; and, consequently, she was invited to St. John's, made much of by the Misses Melford, dignified by the title of the Honorable Emily Melford's "intimate friend," caressed by the Viscountess

herself, and though not yet "out," admitted to all their domestic festivities.

Still Florence retained her independent spirit, her love of her own more humble home, untinged by a wish to exchange her unpretending sphere for that of her noble friends. Notwithstanding that she became an object of envy to many a young lady in the vicinity, who thought her pretensions to the notice of Lady Melford were quite as good as Miss Leslie's, not one in the whole neighborhood could be found to say that this distinction had changed one tittle of her character. She was heard to declare that it was worth while to mix with grandeur and be petted by strangers a little while, as it only made her feel how much dearer was her home, how much more precious the love of its inmates than it had ever seemed before.

Though the refinement of high rank and well-cultivated minds, mingled with lighter accomplishments, rendered the Honorable Misses Melford far more congenial companions to our young heroine than any she had yet met with, there was still something wanting; the mystery of sympathy, that curious power which links us with kindred minds, which bids us feel long before the lights and shadows of character can be distinguished, that we have met with the rich blessing of a heart which can understand us, and on which our own may lean. A fashionable education, and, in the two elder, the gayeties of four or five London seasons, had been productive of their natural consequences, coldness and heartlessness, which could not assimilate with the ardent temperament of Florence. She knew not their extent, for they were always kind to her, and she did not feel any restraint before them; but she intuitively felt that all her high aspirations, her exalted feelings, had better not be spoken, for they would not be understood; even Emily Melford, though but just eighteen had not passed through the ordeal of fashionable training entirely unscathed; perhaps, too, nature was as much in fault as education, for she was naturally cold, though so independent both in thought and action as often to startle Florence.

The first winter St. John's had only been honored by

the presence of Lady Melford and her daughters, occasionally varied by visits from the Viscount, and the Honorable Frederick and Alfred Melford, true specimens of joke-loving, amusement-seeking young men of fashion, whose gayety and good feeling excited the mirth and ready enjoyment of Florence, but nothing more. The second winter brought an addition to the family; Emily had alluded to a cousin, her mother's niece, the Lady Ida Villiers, eight years her senior, and spoken so rapturously of her exceeding grace and beauty, and richly gifted mind, that Florence thought these all-sufficient food for fancy; but the tale connected with Lady Ida was such as to interest much colder hearts than hers.

She had lost her father seven years previously; her mother some time before; and Lady Ida, the last of an ancient line, was left under the guardianship of Lord Melford, until the age of twenty-four, when full liberty became her own. The title of her father, the ancient earldom of Edgemere, had indeed gone to a distant branch, but his possessions, with little diminution, passed to his daughter, leaving her, in consequence, a wealthy heiress. She had certainly charms enough, both of person and mind, to remove all idea that she could be sought merely for fortune; but whatever the cause, the richest and proudest bowed before her, acknowledged her surpassing loveliness, and besought, in all the varieties of passion, the honor of her hand. But the heart of the Lady Ida Villiers had appeared to be as cold as ice; her majesty of demeanor had never descended to encouragement, in even the passing courtesy of the moment. All were rejected, some with winning kindness, some with contemptuous scorn, according as her quick and penetrative mind discovered the true feeling, or wordly-seeking pretence of her respective suitors. In vain her guardians expostulated, and Lord Melford, remembering he was an uncle also, took upon himself to threaten. The young lady was inexorable, and, at length, the truth was discovered. The heart, which had appeared impregnable, had, in fact been carried by storm already; and Lady Ida scrupled neither to deny nor to conceal it, for its love was returned; she knew this in spite of the hopelessness with which it was accompanied.

Edmund St. Maur was the youngest branch of the noble family whose name he bore. There was a chance of the barony becoming his, but a chance far too remote for speculation. Moreover, he and his widowed mother were poor; poor, at least, for the sphere in which their relationship to rank imperatively called them to move; and Edmund was of that delicate frame and constitution, which are too often attendant on studious habits and reflective minds. The late Lord Edgemere had known the worth of both mother and son, and had cherished and encouraged the intimacy between them and his child. Whether he ever thought of danger arising from it, or really would not have objected to the union of Lady Ida with the poor but high-minded Edmund St. Maur, could never be ascertained, as he died before Ida herself was aware of the engaged state of her affections; and St. Maur, whatever might have been his private feelings, knew his position too well to think of their betrayal.

Lady Ida had not, however, been a year an orphan, before the fading form and pallid cheek of Edmund startled her into perfect consciousness as to the state of her own heart; and with all the refinement and delicacy of a high and pure mind, she recalled all that had ever passed between them, all that she knew of his character, and felt that gold, despicable gold, had caused this change. His too sensitive mind imagined fortune had forever divided them, that he dared not aspire to her hand. She knew his pride, and felt that did she not advance more forward than was, perhaps, quite consistent with maidenly propriety, not only her own happiness, but his would be sacrificed forever. Her first measures were sufficiently unsuccessful to rob her own cheek of its glow her own form of its roundness; the more kind, the more gracious her manner, nay, the more she thought to draw him to her side, the more he shunned her.

"But how did she ever discover his sentiments? how ever conquer his pride?" was Florence Leslie's ardent exclamation, aware of the sequel, yet not imagining how these difficulties could be overcome; and Emily Melford, as eager to speak as her companion to listen, continued:—

"Simply because he chanced to have a mother, in

whom he could confide a tale of love. It was easy for Lady Helen to penetrate Ida's secret, and the betrayal of Edmund's sentiments of course followed. Once assured that she was beloved, neither her own maiden modesty nor natural pride could be in aught impugned. All reserve was at an end; they understood each other, and never were three happier persons, I believe, than Ida and Edmund, and not least, Lady Helen."

"She must have been happy, for it was greatly her doing," observed Florence. "But why are they not married yet? why only engaged?"

"For a very weighty reason; Ida had to bear the brunt of all sorts of persecution—my honorable family at their head; every one who could claim the most distant relationship chose to declare she should not so throw herself away, that it was worse than folly; she was wedding herself not alone with poverty, but with death, for every one must see Edmund St. Maur had not five years more to live."

"How cruel!" indignantly exclaimed Florence.

"Cruel, in truth; and not content with this, invectives nearly approaching to insult were thrown at her by all, not excepting my own family."

"Not Lady Melford?—impossible!"

"No, not mamma; she had rather more regard for her sister's daughter, though she disapproved of the match quite as much as others. If the good folks had ever misunderstood my cousin before, it was impossible to misunderstand her then. She bore the storm firmly, and, in appearance, unconcernedly. Papa once went the length of saying, he would prohibit the marriage. She told him very calmly that she understood his legal authority ended when she was four-and-twenty, and she did not intend to marry till then. When the important day arrived, and, becoming her own mistress, there seemed no farther obstacle to her happiness, St. Maur was suddenly taken seriously ill, as the medical men declared, from over excitement, and so many dangerous symptoms returned, that he was peremptorily desired to winter at Madeira and then to remain in Italy till his health was perfectly re-established. They assured Lady Helen and my cousin

that if he did this, no danger whatever need be apprehended; but, if he should remain in England, they could not answer for the consequences. Imagine poor Ida's anguish; even at this moment she would have united her fate with his, that she might be permitted to follow him, and be his nurse and his untiring attendant, but Edmund was far too unselfish, even in his love, to permit this sacrifice on her part; and Lady Helen, much as she felt for her, seconded her son. All things were against poor Ida. The medical fraternity put a decided negative on her proposal; declaring that, in his present state, even the pain of separation would be better borne than the excitement of her presence. The opinion of Sir Charles Brashleigh at length made her yield; she consented to let her lover go without her, though she well knew what a period of anxiety and suffering his absence, and in this precarious state, would be to her. I never saw her so wholly and utterly overcome as she was the first week after his departure. She struggled against it till she was thrown on a bed of sickness, and I am certain she will neither look nor feel like herself till she shall rejoin him."

"And when will that be?" inquired Florence, her eyes swelling in tears; "how long have they been parted?"

"Nearly eighteen months, and it has been a period of intense anxiety to Ida. The accounts have become more and more favorable, but of course poor Ida cannot feel happy or secure, till she is by his side. Papa is so angry at her resistance to his authority, that he will not allow us to go to Italy, as we all wished to do; he fancies separation will do the work for him, and that they will forget each other. However, next spring or autumn, Lord Edgemere's family go to Rome, and Ida goes with them."

"Oh, what a blessed time to look forward to!" exclaimed Florence; who added, "but you say she has even encountered persecution from your own family—surely your sisters must have been her friends?"

"Surely not, my very simple girl. Georgiana imagined herself one of the greatest wits and scholars of the day; and that Ida, without the least effort, should surpass her, and fascinate not only the butterflies, but every man of

genius and letters who approached her, was somewhat too mortifying to be borne meekly. No woman ever yet quietly surrendered the reputation of superior talents to another woman, and certainly not to a younger. Then Sophia once dreamed she was a beauty; and though three successive crowded seasons passed, and no reward of that beauty made its appearance in anything like an offer of marriage, she chose to imagine Ida's faultless face and form a decided affront to her, and so disliked her accordingly."

"How can you speak so of your sisters?" inquired Florence, half laughingly, half reproachfully.

"How can I? very easily, for I hate such little-mindedness. My dear Florence, London is very different from the country. Sisters so often become rivals; there is so little time in the whirl of gayety for words and acts of mutual kindness, that we should laugh at the idea of imagining better than other people."

"Save me from London, then!" ejaculated Florence, so heartily, that her companion was yet more amused; but Florence continued—"How comes it, Emily, that you can afford to speak so enthusiastically of Lady Ida?"

"Simply, first, because I know I am no beauty; secondly, it is too much trouble to attempt rivalling her in talent or in wit; and, thirdly, she is eight years older than I am, and, before I make my *début*, she will have passed all ordeal, by taking unto herself a partner for better or worse, and so she cannot be my rival; so do not give me credit for any seeming amiability, for if I were a *belle*, and a would-be *blue* one, I should be just as envious as others."

CHAPTER IV.

IDA.—SYMPATHY.—FRIENDSHIP FORMED.

Lady Ida Villiers came, and Florence Leslie found every vision of fancy and anticipation more than realized. It was impossible for such an enthusiastic, affectionate

being as herself to be in Lady Ida's company, to listen to her varied powers of conversation, which she had the rare faculty of adapting to every character with whom she mingled, still more to find herself, after the first few days, an object of notice, even of interest, without feeling every ardent affection, based on esteem, enlisted in her cause She found, to her utmost astonishment, that her thoughts were read by her new companion before she had shaped them into words; her tastes drawn forth irresistibly to meet with sympathy and improvement; her simple pleasures, both in books and nature, appreciated, encouraged, and so delightfully directed higher than she had ever ventured alone, that every hour spent in Lady Ida's society was productive of pleasures which she had never even imagined before. Nor was it only by words that Lady Ida's character opened itself to the admiring and wondering gaze of Florence. She observed her daily conduct to those around her. Courteous and kind, to her aunt far more affectionate than either of her own daughters—no stranger could have ever imagined she was simply returning good for evil; even to her uncle she never failed in courtesy and gentleness, though his manner towards her was always cold and supercilious. The trials of her own heart, her own anxieties, never passed her lips; but the paleness of her beautiful cheek, the occasional dimness of the large, soft, hazel eye, the fragility of her finely-proportioned form, were only too painful evidences of all which in secret she endured.

Obtuse beings, indeed, might not have marked these things; but Florence did, and with all the vivid imaginativeness of her nature, placed herself in Lady Ida's situation, and shuddered. Faithful love and mutual devotion were subjects absolutely hallowed to her fancy; and so strong was this feeling, that her own heart beat thick and painfully on those days when letters could be received from Italy, and her quick eye, awakened by affection, could read the rapidly-increasing paleness of Lady Ida's cheek, the trembling of the hand rendering every effort to continue drawing, writing, or work impossible, though all the while her conversation upon different subjects would continue without hesitation or pause. Once she had been

present when one of these precious letters was unexpectedly brought to her friend, and Lady Ida, it seemed, had forgotten any one was near, for the thrilling cry of transport with which she seized the papers, the passionate kisses she pressed on the senseless letters which composed his name, the burst of fervent thankfulness which escaped her lips, betrayed how strong must be the control which she exercised when receiving similar treasures in presence of her family.

Some dispositions would have triumphed in witnessing this absence of restraint, would have hugged themselves up in the belief that they were more in her confidence than others. Not so Florence Leslie. She glided from the apartment as silently, as fleetly, as if she fancied herself guilty in tarrying one moment to witness emotions so sacred and so blessed. Now it so happened that Lady Ida was aware of her young companion's presence when the packet was received, but not till the delight of its perusal was in part subsided had she leisure to remark that Florence had disappeared, bearing the drawing on which she had been engaged along with her. The action struck her, and heightened the interest that from the first the simple country girl had excited; nor was the feeling decreased by the glistening eye and timid accents with which, when they met again, and, as it chanced, alone, Florence ventured to ask,

"If the news from Italy were favorable? If Mr. St Maur were as well as by the last accounts?"

The pressure of the hand which accompanied the rapid answer, "Better, my dear girl, better than he has been yet and for a much longer interval," at once told her that Lady Ida accepted her sympathy.

No persuasion, no authority, could prevail on Lady Ida to join Lady Melford and her daughters in their visitings balls, concerts, and other Christmas amusements, with which they sought to while away their sojourn in the country.

Georgiana and Sophia called her proud and overbearing, and said that the poor simple folks of Torquay were not good enough to associate with one so fastidious. Even

Lady Melford represented that her reserve might create unpleasant feelings, which would be better avoided.

"Tell them the truth, my dear aunt," was her half laughing, though earnest reply; "tell them Lady Ida Villiers has forsworn all gayety such as visiting engenders, till she has made a pilgrimage to St. Peter's, and has returned thence miraculously cured. Pray smooth all the plumes my reserve may have ruffled, by the true information, that for the last eighteen months I have withdrawn myself almost entirely from London society; that I mean not the very slightest affront; and if my word be not sufficient, I will give them references to Almack's and lady patronesses, and to all the givers of balls, concerts, private theatricals, etc., as vouchers of my truth."

"How can you be so ridiculous, Ida? You make yourself the laughing-stock of the country by this perverseness. I shall tell them no such thing. Surely, when you are the wife of Edmund St. Maur, it will be time enough to make such a sacrifice; there is no occasion for it beforehand."

"Then you see, aunt, you will do less to save the poor people's feelings than I would."

"As if such a tale would be delivered," interposed Miss Melford, sourly.

"Disbelief is their sin, then, Georgy, not mine; I would tell the truth."

But laugh off such attacks as she might, she was not to be persuaded; and, much to the marvel of her cousins, the greater part of the gentry continued to give her the meed of admiration still.

Lady Ida Villiers might and did refuse to enter into evening gayeties; but their residence in Torquay presented her with one rich source of gratification, which drew her from herself almost unconsciously. Nature, the beautiful scenery of Devonshire, presented, even in the winter months, sufficient charm to banish all recollection that in summer it could be lovelier still. Lady Ida would order out her own carriage, and leaving the gay resorts of the town, put herself under the guidance of the delighted Florence, and explore the country for twenty miles round;

and when there, sketches were to be taken, associations of history or romance recalled, passages of favorite poems sought for, in glowing words to embody the imagery around.

For Florence these were, indeed, happy days. She gave vent to her vivid fancy, her exuberant elasticity of spirits, for it was impossible to retain the silencing awe which Lady Ida's superior endowments, both personal and mental, had first inspired, when thus unrestrainedly enjoying her society. Emily Melford was often of their party, and by her quaint remarks only heightened our young heroine's buoyant mirth; and in witnessing her happiness, Lady Ida, ever the most unselfish of mortals, could forget her own anxieties, and rejoice that even in her present depression she had the power of bestowing so much joy.

"Florence, you are really such an admirable Cicerone, I must recommend you to all visitors of Devonshire. If it had not been for you I should have left the country as ignorant of its beauties as I entered it"—was Lady Ida's observation, when returning from a beautiful excursion to the ruins of Berry Pomeroy Castle.

Their road was winding close by the banks of the Teign, seeming to be divided from the river only by the high luxuriant trees, which, growing on either side so closely, the carriage would have been in some danger had it encountered any other vehicle. There were innumerable evergreen shrubs, and the clear tracery of every minute branch and twig of the trees against the light blue sky, produced as beautiful an effect as the darker and richer shades of summer. The sun, too, was setting with that gorgeousness peculiar to Devonshire even in the winter months; and the river reflected every shade with a fidelity as lovely as it was striking.

"You certainly ought to give some weighty proof of gratitude, Ida; for either Florence or Devonshire has made you a different being. You are more like yourself than I ever see you in London," rejoined Emily.

"Poor London, for what sins has it not to be answerable in your estimation, Emily? I wish you would be candid for once. You abuse London, because, you say,

the people are so cold and artificial, and for a multitude of causes which I cannot define. Will you tell me, are your country visitors more to your taste?"

"No; they are as much too simple, as the Londoners are too artificial; but at least you can escape from their influence better here than in London."

"Then you would like to live an anchorite in the country?"

"Not for the world! I like society, bad as it is, rather too well."

"Then pray do not abuse it. You know I often tell you, Emily, it is your own natural coldness which reflects itself upon every body."

"Thanks for the compliment, most noble cousin."

"It is no compliment, Emily; but sad, sober truth. I cannot bear such sentiments in one so young; for what injustice or evil can you have witnessed?"

"None in the world; only as we believe in original sin, there must be some contradiction to our faith in human virtue. Now, as I mean to be consistent, I uphold that evil is more prevalent than good; and, to descend from such grave subjects, that we meet disagreeable people more often than agreeable ones."

"Perhaps so; but there is good in the world, dark as it is—great good, and the sublimest virtue. I believe there may be almost perfect characters even on earth."

"Edmund St. Maur, for instance," interrupted Emily Melford, mischievously.

"No, Emily," replied Lady Ida, gravely. "If I had made him an idol of perfection, I should stand but little chance of lasting happiness; for I should be liable to have my bright picture tarnished by all the unforeseen chances and changes of life. I esteem him, or I would not wed him; but I know his failings, as I trust he does mine. He is not old enough for the perfection to which I allude; he has had the trial neither of adversity nor of prosperity —I mean, in the extreme. His mother comes far nearer my standard of perfection in human character than my Edmund."

"Eloquently answered, at least, cousin mine; I may believe you or not, as I please. Florence, what are you

thinking about? Ida is no oracle, that you should so devour her words. My wisdom is quite as good."

"I do not think so, Emily; for my feelings side with her view of the question."

"But I wish you would tell me, Lady Ida, all you find to like in London."

"All, Florence! what a question! Why, a great many things; some of which, had I you near me, I would compel you to like London for, too. Its magazines of art; its galleries of painting and sculpture; its varied avenues to the indulgence of every taste—in music, from the solemn strains of our sublime Handel to the lightest melody of the Italians. Then there are all the *literati* of the land. We may gather around us the poet, the philosopher, the novelist, and mark if their characters accord with their writings, and love or shun them accordingly. Oh! there are many things to make a residence in London delightful for a while; though I acknowledge with you, I should wish my home to be an old baronial hall of dear old England."

"But these things, Lady Ida, are only for the noble and rich. Now, in Rome, Naples, Florence, such treasures of art and science are open to every rank and every fortune; and there too, with the most lovely country that eye can dwell on or mind delight in."

"So it seems from a distance, my dear girl. When I return from my pilgrimage to Italy, I will give you truer impressions. Will you trust me? and, meanwhile, rest content in old England?"

"Yes if you *will* tell me."

"If I will! what do you mean?"

The eyes of Florence slowly filled with tears, and she turned hastily to the window, exclaiming at the same instant that they were at home:

CHAPTER V.

A MORNING AT ST. JOHN'S.

THAT Florence Leslie's simple and unselfish nature was uncorrupted by the notice she attracted in the noble circle of St. John's, many trifling incidents served to prove. She had been spending some days, as usual, at St. John's, and was seated one morning in Lady Ida's own boudoir, employed in finishing a drawing of a pretty little group of peasant children, who had attracted her notice on a late excursion. Lady Ida was embroidering; Emily Melford stretched listlessly on a sofa, reading, every now and then uttering sounds expressive (as Florence declared) of such disapproval, that she wondered how she could go on with the book. It was a lovely morning in March, so balmy that the French windows were open, permitting the entrance of a complete flood of sunshine. Already the lawn, on which the windows opened, was spangled with snow-drops, hepaticas, violets, double and single primroses, and the loveliest hyacinths of every brilliant color, decorated the room. It was a lovely retreat, peculiarly delightful to Florence, from the books, the music, prints, and flowers which Lady Ida's taste had collected around her. Their retirement was often invaded by Alfred Melford, who declared himself a butterfly, seeking the warmest sunshine; and so, wherever he might rove for a while, he was even compelled to his cousin's boudoir.

"What *is* the matter, Emily? Why are you groaning over your book in this melancholy style? If it be such trash, why read it?"

"Because I have nearly exhausted all the libraries in this out-of-the-world place, and I am even compelled to resort to this, over which I chanced to find that simpleton Florence deeply affected the other day; so, as I will give her credit sometimes for good taste, I thought I would try it."

"I should think you need scarcely resort to public

libraries for books to while away your time, *before* dinner at least. My uncle has furnished a plentiful supply, I am sure, and you are quite welcome to any of mine."

"Thanks, cousin mine; I am too lazy in the country for any thing but novels; they sickened me with history, and almost with poetry, at school."

"For Heaven's sake, Emily, do not say so, and still more, do not feel so. Do you mean to tell me you never intend reading any thing serious again?"

"Now, Ida, do not preach. You do not know what it is to be under fashionable thraldom, and care, rigid as that of any lady abbess, for fourteen years out of nineteen; so you cannot tell what it is to feel free. I mean to seek my own comfort, my own pleasure henceforth, to make up for it."

"And be the most selfish, most disagreeable being amongst all those you dignify with such appellations," replied Lady Ida indignantly. "If you do, only keep out of my way, for I shall disclaim all relationship with you."

"But what is there in this book you so dislike, Emily?" interposed Florence. And an animated discussion of its excellence and non-excellence followed, which we have no space to transcribe: it ended by Emily's declaring that Florence was certainly intended for a poet, as she had such highflown notions of human nature—all the worse for her.

"Why all the worse?"

"Because you will never be appreciated or understood, and are doomed to lonely musing all your life."

"Do not heed her, Florence," interposed Lady Ida; "she judges all the world by herself!"

"Oh, but you do not know Florence as I do: she says it is not only possible, but quite natural, to seek the happiness of those we love more than our own."

"Well, and she is right."

"What, even in the rivalry of love?"

"Stop, Emily, let me tell Lady Ida exactly what I said—simply that I thought it *was* possible for a woman to love, before feeling certain of a return; and that, should she ever discover the happiness of him she loved was un-

fortunately distinct from her own, she would do every thing in her power to forward that happiness, even if in so doing she condemned herself to misery. Emily declares it is impossible, and that she should herself hate her supposed lover, and his more fortunate choice, one and all inveterately."

"It is a weighty subject for decision, Florence," replied Lady Ida; "requiring more complete immolation of self, than, perhaps, any but those in such an emergency can imagine; but that there are such noble spirits I do most truthfully believe."

"There, Emily!" exclaimed Florence, triumphantly.

"Wait till you yourself are in such an enviable position, and decide on the possibility or impossibility then," replied Emily.

"If such suffering were indeed mine, Heaven grant I should feel and act the same; and that I might be stronger, firmer, O how much firmer than I am now," responded Florence; and there was so much solemnity, so much feeling in the tone, that it effectually checked any further jesting on the part of Emily. All that is really natural is always affecting; and Florence was so completely a child of nature, that what would have appeared folly in others, in her did but enhance the interest she never failed to excite, and increase affection in every heart capable of appreciating and understanding her.

"And *I* say, Florence, dearest, Heaven grant you may never pass through such a fiery ordeal, for, of all persons, you are the least fitted to endure it," answered Lady Ida, in a tone which brought her young companion to the cushion at her feet, and resting her arm on her knee, Florence simply asked, "Why?"

"Because you give me the idea of one formed but for happiness, my gentle-minded girl. One who is so continually alive to the feelings, the joys, and griefs of others, ought to be happy herself. It would be a real grief to me to hear you were in sorrow, Florence."

"So, if your love is to be unreturned, do not love at all," laughingly added Emily; "or Ida would have to grieve somewhat too soon."

"Love! oh, I never mean to love! I dread its power

far too much. You know what my song says;" and the lively girl flew to the piano, and warbled forth:—

"No, tempt me not, I will not love!
My soul could scarce sustain
The thrilling transports of its bliss—
The anguish of its pain:
Too full of joy for earth to know,
Too wild to look above;
I could not bear the doubt, the dread—
No! no! I will not love!

"No, tempt me not—love's sweetest flower
Hath poison in its smile;
Love only woos with dazzling power,
To fetter hearts the while:
I will not wear its rosy chain,
Nor even its fragrance prove;
I fear too much love's silent pain—
No! no! I will not love!"

"Bravo, Florence!" exclaimed Alfred Melford, bounding through the open window, with a pink note in his hand; "I never heard you sing so well; what has inspired you?"

"Your absence, of course, and the absence of all critical listeners, but Ida and myself. What have you there?"

"Something to shake off your *ennui*. An invitation to a ball at the Oaklands."

"Oh, delightful! give it me;" and the young lady was absolutely roused enough to spring from her sofa, and snatch the note from her brother's hand: "and one for Ida, too, of course, and of course she will not go. Florence, do you think your family are asked?"

"Probably not. Your friends associate but with lords and ladies, gold and jewels; and, believing fine feathers make fine birds, unless I would consent to go, jackdaw fashion, bedecked in borrowed plumes, they would not admit me."

"Florence Leslie a satirist!" rejoined young Melford, laughing; "who would have believed it? What a joke it would be to attire and proclaim you the Lady Ida Villiers, and take you with us. You are much of the

same height—Ida, do bestow your jewels and name on Florence for the night."

"She is welcome to them, if she will accept them," replied Lady Ida.

"Thank you, I had rather not, even if I stood no chance of being recognized by Mr. and Mrs. Oakland themselves, and the greater number of their guests; I will never go where my own proper person is despised."

"Proud, too, Miss Florence! why, I never knew you before to-day. I vow if you were not likely to be discovered, you should go as Lady Ida; but as Miss Leslie cannot, Ida, I wish you would, if it were only to give these affectors of refinement a taste of England's real dignity and pride."

"You know I never go anywhere, Alfred; and Florence has not given me any desire to make an exception in favor of Mrs. Oakland."

"Ida can give the good folks of the country a much better idea of London refinement and fashion, than by going out to do so, Alfred. I have been conjuring and beseeching her to give a ball, preceded by a regular series of *tableaux vivans*, dress, scenery, frame and all. One of the large rooms upstairs would do admirably for it, and then a ball! Why, this poor rustic town would be in convulsions of excitement for months afterwards; and, as for you, what would you not be in their estimation? Beauty—grace—fascination! Ida, you would impress yourself on every Devonshire heart indelibly, to the utter forgetfulness of all the seeming pride, with which you may have been charged. You promised me to think about it."

"But not to grant it, Emily."

"Oh, but to think about it is half consent, Alfred,—Florence, you might assist me with your united influence."

"I am sure I will, even on my knee, sweet cousin mine; be merciful—think how rusticated, how gothic we are here, and for pity give us some taste of London and its fashion. The governor is much too solemn for any thing but those great pompous dinners, which, in a country place like this, I detest. Now, do be kind, sweet Ida; Edmund is better, you are going to Italy next August, and, in all probability, ere the year is out, will have

merged the Lady Ida Villiers in the Lady Ida St. Maur. Now, all these things considered, ought you not to give us poor mortals the thing we crave? You know Edmund has taken you to task very often, for making yourself a nun for his sake; and, I am sure, if I could but write and ask him, he would say—Ida, be obliging; give the poor folks a ball."

"Alfred, you are perfectly absurd; get up, and be a rational being. Florence, what do you say—shall I give this said ball—would you like it?"

"Would I not!" exclaimed Florence, with animation; "and the *tableaux!* oh! I have wished to see them so very often."

"Mind, then, if I grant this weighty boon, I engage you for one of my principal performers."

"Me! dear Lady Ida; I should be terrified out of all pleasure—how could I compete with Mrs. and the Misses Oakland?"

"Oh, admirably!" interposed Melford, comically; "you shall not dance at the ball, if you will not give your aid to the *tableaux*. Come, cousin, love, I give you a fortnight to think of it; for it must not be till Easter week. Frederic comes down then with my father, and they bring a host of people with them, so we shall muster a splendid *corps*. I promise to be rational and grave, and all you can possibly desire."

"And I will read every wise book you can recommend, and forswear all novels till after your ball, Ida, dear;" continued Emily, hanging caressingly about her cousin's neck.

"And not remember one word of my wise books, as you call them," replied Lady Ida, laughing. "Well, wait till my next letters from Italy, and I promise you a decided answer then."

CHAPTER VI.

GOOD NEWS.—THOUGHTS OF THE FUTURE.—WOMAN'S INFLUENCE OVER WOMAN.

LADY IDA'S only condition of waiting for news from Italy was so natural, that her cousins did not utter one word of entreaty more, but amused themselves by anticipating all the delights they were pre-determined to enjoy. Alfred waylaid the postman every evening. Emily commenced reading Scott's Life of Napoleon: whether balls, *tableaux*, and charades, fashionable costume, and a new set of jewels presented to her by her cousin Ida for Mrs. Oakland's grand assembly, ever floated on the pages, till, by an Arabian transformation, Scott seemed to write of them, and not of heroes and battles, we will not pretend to say; but certain it is, Lady Ida's quiet smile at Emily's new study appeared to doubt the good effects which might accrue from it. Florence evinced no unusual excitement, but there was a bright glitter in her dark eye, a laughter on her lip, whenever Emily alluded to the ball, which said she enjoyed its anticipation quite as much as her more noisy companions. The Honorable Miss Melford drew herself up, and looked solemn, and declared, Ida might talk, and Emily make herself a fool, but nothing would come of it Miss Sophia looked at her pretty face and person, in a large pier-glass, about six times more often than usual in the course of every day, and allowed that a ball would be very agreeable, and *tableaux* still more so; and Emily enjoyed a hearty fit of laughter, in spite of Lady Ida's reproaches and Florence's entreaties, at catching her sister one day hunting out a variety of dresses, and practising various graceful attitudes for the different characters she might be called upon to personate.

The long-desired letters came, at length, and were so much more than usually satisfactory, that Lady Ida felt her own spirits rise sufficiently, even to satisfy Emily and Alfred; who, notwithstanding their frivolity, really loved her, and would have done much to serve her. Edmund

St. Maur was so well, that it required all the authority of his medical adviser, all the persuasion of his mother, to prevent his setting off for England to fetch Ida himself. He had been told that a residence of four or five years longer in Italy, would (under a gracious Providence) so effectually confirm his health, that he might then, in all probability, reside wherever he pleased; endowed with sufficient physical strength to occupy that high station among the senators and the *literati* of his country, for which he had, at one time, so pined as to increase the disorder under which he labored. A brief visit to England might not be hurtful, but there was a doubt attached to it, which Lady Helen could not nerve her mind to meet; and while Edmund filled his letter to his betrothed with eloquent intreaties for her only to say the word, and he would fly to her side, in contempt of every prohibition; that his inability to live in England was all a farce; why should he banish his Ida from her native land, where she was so fitted to shine, when he was as well and strong as any of her countrymen? While he wrote thus, Lady Helen besought her to come to them at once, by her presence, her affection, to retain him in Italy, to control those passionate aspirations after fame, which he was not yet strong enough to bear, and which her influence alone had power to check.

Had these letters been the only ones received, there would indeed have been much to cause rejoicing, but they were mingled with alloy, as to how Lady Ida could reach Nice as soon as inclination prompted. Lord Melford, irritated, as we have seen, beyond all bounds at his niece's independent spirit, she knew would not stir a step to forward their meeting, and would as soon think of taking a flight to the moon, as of accompanying her himself to Italy; though both his sons declared, that were it but etiquette, they would go with their cousin themselves, rather than see her so tormented by anxiety or delay. Fortunately for Lady Ida, the inheritor of her father's title, who had been selected by him as her second guardian, was a very different character from Lord Melford. Disapprove of the match Lord Edgemere decidedly did, but only on account of St. Maur's extremely precarious health

Lady Ida's constancy and independence, however, instead of irritating him, only increased the warm admiration which her character had always excited; and he had long determined that he would himself conduct her to Italy, and give her to St. Maur, from the bosom of his own family.

Lady Edgemere had always loved Ida as her own child, and received from her the attentions of a daughter; while her eldest daughter, Lady Mary Villiers, was Ida's dearest and most intimate friend, though nearly five years her junior. This noble family had never joined in those persecutions which Emily Melford described as heaped upon Ida by every man, woman, or child, who could claim relationship with her; an exception, perhaps, because, though distantly connected, they were scarcely relations, and, being of a different school to the Melfords, could afford to admire Edmund St. Maur in spite of his poverty and talent.

The same post, however, which brought Lady Ida such blessed tidings from Italy, also gave letters from the Edgemeres, announcing their intention of accepting Lady Melford's invitation to St. John's for the ensuing Easter, and that the period of their visit to the continent was entirely dependent on Ida's will.

Great, indeed, was the relief and joy this information gave to her mind; and when the excitement of answering these all-important epistles was over—when she had poured forth her whole soul to her betrothed, peremptorily, though with inexpressible tenderness, forbidding his return to England; telling him that in three months (perhaps less) Lord Edgemere's family would be at Nice, and he might chance to find her with them, never to part from him again in this life; with many other breathings of that fond heart, too sacred for any eye save his to whom they were addressed—when she had written to Lady Mary, in all the confidence their mutual friendship demanded, intreating her to make haste down to Devonshire, as she longed for some one to whom she might speak of Edmund and her future prospects, since she felt sometimes as if her spirit must bend beneath its weight of grief, anxiety, and now of joy, referring her to her letter to Lord Edge-

mere concerning her wishes for speedy departure—when all these weighty matters were arranged, Ida had leisure to remember, and inclination to perform her promise to her cousins; and telling Emily she must take every trouble off her hands, by collecting the multiplicity of invitations she had received, and inviting every one whom she ought to invite, she gave her and Alfred *carte blanche*, to arrange, order, and collect every thing for the furtherance of their wishes, that the ball might be in truth the *recherche*, the refined, the elegant reflection of all the fashion, grace, and dignity they were pleased to attribute to herself.

It was marvellous to see how rapidly Emily Melford's *ennui* passed away before this very delightful employment, though she made so much bustle and confusion in her preparations, as greatly to annoy and torment her sister Georgiana, who imagined herself far too literary and wise to care for such frivolous things: besides which, it was a woeful falling off to her consequence, that Lady Ida had the power of making herself so exceedingly agreeable to the simple country folks, among whom Miss Melford had reigned an oracle, a star, brighter than she had ever shone in London: and worse still, it was only Emily and Alfred with whom she could quarrel, for Ida was so quiet in the midst of it all, so faithful to her own *boudoir* and its refined amusements, that she looked in vain for some annoyance wherewith to charge her.

And where was Florence Leslie all this time? Still with her parents' free and glad consent, lingering by the side of Lady Ida, imbibing improvement, alike morally and mentally, from lips to which harshness and unkindness were such utter strangers, that the severest truths seemed sweet, the boldly uttered reproof scarcely pain; but there was a secret alloy, scarcely acknowledged even to herself, in her brightest anticipations. The more her young and most ardent affections twined themselves round one whose notice would evince they were not despised, the more she felt the truth of her mother's words that it would have been more for her lasting happiness had Lady Ida's rank been nearer her own. She had not felt this when thrown, as they were, so intimately together; but when she heard her speak of the friends she expected

almost all of them of her own rank, and dear from long years of intimacy, there would intrude the thought, what could she, a simple country girl, be to her, when Lady Ida was in Italy a happy wife, or in England surrounded by her own friends. But though the thought of the future would sometimes silently and sadly shade the delight of the present, she continued to rejoice in listening to her words, in learning lessons of self-knowledge by the study of Lady Ida's higher cast of character, and determined to correct all those youthful weaknesses and failings of which she became conscious in herself by their total exclusion from her friend; and the wish to become more worthy of regard, of esteem, till Lady Ida could look upon her in the light of a friend, not merely as an affectionate, playful girl, scarcely passed childhood, pervaded her whole being.

It is the fashion to deride woman's influence over woman, to laugh at female friendship, to look with scorn on all those who profess it; but perhaps the world at large little knows the effect of this influence—how often the unformed character of a young, timid, and gentle girl, may be influenced for good or evil by the power of an intimate female friend. There is always to me a doubt of the warmth, the strength, and purity of her feelings, when a young girl merges into womanhood, passing over the threshold of actual life, seeking only the admiration of the other sex; watching, pining for a husband, or lovers, perhaps, and looking down on all female friendship as romance and folly. No young spirit was ever yet satisfied with the love of nature. Friendship, or love, gratifies self-love; for it tacitly acknowledges that we must possess some good qualities to attract beyond the mere love of nature. Coleridge justly observes—"that it is well ordered that the amiable and estimable should have a fainter perception of their own qualities than their friends have, otherwise they would love themselves." Now, friendship, or love, permits their doing this unconsciously; mutual affection is a tacit avowal and appreciation of mutual good qualities—perhaps friendship yet more than love; for the latter is far more an aspiration, a passion, than the former, and influences the permanent character

much less. Under the magic of love, a girl is generally in a feverish state of excitement, often in a wrong position, deeming herself the goddess, her lover the adorer; whereas, it is her will that must bend to his, herself be abnegated for him. Friendship neither permits the former nor demands the latter. It influences silently, often unconsciously; perhaps its power is never known till years afterwards. A girl who stands alone, without acting or feeling friendship, is generally a cold unamiable being, so wrapt in self as to have no room for any person else, except, perhaps, a lover, whom she only seeks and values, as offering his devotion to that same idol, self. Female friendship may be abused, may be but a name for gossip, letter-writing, romance, nay worse, for absolute evil; but that Shakspeare, the mighty wizard of human hearts, thought highly and beautifully of female friendship, we have his exquisite portraits of Rosalind and Celia, Helen and the Countess, undeniable to prove; and if he, who could portray every human passion, every subtle feeling of humanity, from the whelming tempest of love to the fiendish influences of envy and jealousy and hate; from the incomprehensible mystery of Hamlet's wondrous spirit, to the simplicity of the gentle Miranda, the dove-like innocence of Ophelia, who could be crushed by her weight of love, but not reveal it; if Shakspeare scorned not to picture the sweet influence of female friendship shall women pass it by as a theme too tame, too idle for their pens. A late work, though of the lightest novel kind, has powerfully shown the fearful evil that may be accomplished by woman upon woman. Our simple tale would prove the good. How consoling and how beautiful may be "woman's mission," even unto woman.

There was not a particle of selfishness in Florence Leslie's feelings, for at the very moment she wept in secret over her own fast fading joys, she rejoiced with the most unfeigned pleasure that Lady Ida's term of anxiety was drawing to a close, and could she in any way have hastened her meeting with Edmund St. Maur, she would have done so gladly.

Still the idea of a ball, and given by Lady Ida, and yet more, that her taste, simple as it was, had been more than

once consulted and even followed in the decoration of rooms, etc.; the very fact that Lady Ida had asked her if she would like the ball to be given before she answered her cousin's entreaties, and evidently thought of her pleasure in so doing—all this was delightful; and, in witnessing her heartless, almost childish effusions of joy, Lady Ida felt as if her consent to an exertion for which she had very little inclination was amply repaid.

CHAPTER VII.

SOME DUTIES.—AN ANXIOUS THOUGHT.—THE BALL DRESS.

THE invitations for Lady Ida's ball were dispatched, giving full four weeks' notice; and no little amusement did Alfred and Emily Melford promise themselves, in quizzing the heterogeneous mass of quality, real and affected, whom they should succeed in mustering together. In vain did Lady Ida remonstrate against this flippancy, declaring that all whom they had invited should receive the same courtesy as titled guests. Her cousins would have their joke.

About a week after the invitations had been issued, Lady Ida received a note from Florence, stating that her mother had had an unusually severe attack of illness, and though she trusted all danger would pass away, as it had often done before, she dared not hope to take any part in the intended amusements. Trusting that Florence's natural anxiety had magnified her fears, Lady Ida answered this note in person; and though she could not succeed in making the young girl hopeful as herself, her kindly sympathy so far roused her drooping energies as to check the indulgence of sorrow, to which she was perhaps too naturally prone, and made her feel no longer incapacitated from serving as well as watching the beloved invalid.

"Your mother will do so well, dearest Florence, I shall still have you to dance at my ball," was Lady Ida's playful farewell, after no short visit; but Florence answered with a mournful shake of the head

"Oh no, I do not think of it. If mamma is well enough to admit even the possibility of my coming, it will be quite happiness enough. Besides," she added, with a deep blush, but unable to control her own ingenuousness, "I am not like you, Lady Ida; I am my own sempstress on such occasions; and I have neither time nor inclination to give to such things now."

Lady Ida kissed her blushing cheek, and simply saying, "You are a dear, truthful girl, Florence, and need not blush so prettily about it," departed.

Days passed, and Mrs. Leslie slowly rallied; but Florence remained true to her own unselfish nature. She nursed her mother, cheered her father; wrote all the letters to Walter, that he might not be anxious; and superintended Minie's studies; so that the economy of their small, but happy household, should go on the same. And often did her father press her to his bosom, and declare she was indeed a comfort to them all. There was at such times that peculiar expression of sweet, though mournful, satisfaction on Mrs. Leslie's features which we have before noticed; and Florence would have wondered had she witnessed the agitation of her mother as Mr. Leslie, on her leaving the room, bent over the invalid's couch, and whispered fondly, "I have indeed secured a treasure in listening to your request, my best beloved. Oh that our own Minie may walk in her paths, and give us equal comfort."

Mrs. Leslie only pressed his hand convulsively, and seemed imploring him by her looks not to give utterance to the thought, however precious it might be.

"Nay, you are too morbidly sensitive on this point, love," he replied. "I wish I could understand your fear, and so soothe and remove it."

"You cannot, Edward," was the agitated reply; "it is peculiarly a woman's. You think of our sweet Florence as she is to us, to Walter, to Minie; to all with whom, as a child, she associates; but my fears look beyond. She must love; she may be loved, sought, asked for; and can we, dare we, permit her to enter the solemn engagement of marriage without revealing——"

"Wait till the evil comes," interrupted her husband,

affectionately kissing her. "I have no such fearful apprehensions; and, even in such an alternative, would act as I do now, conscientiously believing there would be more virtue in so doing than in condemning one so pure and good to suffering and misery, which the truth, however softened, must produce."

The day before the eventful Thursday, Mr. Leslie observed to his daughter, as he was going out after breakfast, "Your mother is so much better, my dear girl. You will go with me to Lady Ida's ball, will you not?"

"I cannot, dear papa."

"But I am sure your mother would prefer having only Minie for a companion for a few hours, than that you should lose so great a pleasure."

"I know she would, papa. Mine is quite a feminine reason, so pray do not laugh at me. I have no proper dress, and I could not be so disrespectful to Lady Ida as to appear plainly attired."

"But, my dear child, why have you not a dress?"

"Because I was too premature in my preparations, and so am punished for my vanity. I knew of this ball a full fortnight before the invitations were given, and to be quite ready I destroyed a dress, that might in an extremity have done, to make use of the beautiful lace which was on it for another. That other I have not had time to make. and so you see, dear papa, I am compelled to stay at home."

"But why not get it made, my Florence? Surely you do not imagine I could grudge you such an indulgence?"

"No papa. If I had thought so, perhaps I would have been tempted to think only of myself; but I knew I had but to ask and have, and so it was easy not to ask. And then, the first fortnight I really did not think at all about it; and I was still much too anxious when I saw mamma getting better. I own I did wish it were possible to have my dress ready, but then I knew I could not make it without neglecting Minie and Walter, and perhaps even mamma; and I would not expose myself to such a temptation. No, dear papa, I shall be much happier at home on Thursday night than going to St. John's with the recollection of so many duties unperformed."

"I quite believe you, my sweet child; but still I grieve you did not come to me. Did you never think of such a thing?"

"Oh yes, more than once; but how could I teaze you with such a trifle when you were so anxious about mamma, and I know Walter's being from home increases your expenses very materially; and you look so careworn sometimes. Why, the ball were not worth the pain it would have been for you to fancy your Florence regardless of these things."

"You are careful of every one, every thing but yourself, my child. Would I had thought of this before, for I cannot bear you should lose such a pleasure. It is too late now."

"Quite, quite too late, papa; so do not be so cruel as to turn tempter," replied Florence, smiling and throwing her arms round his neck to kiss him; then bounding from the room to conceal that, in spite of all her assurances, in spite of even the still small voice of conscience sounding again and again "You have done your duty, be happy Florence?" still, child as she was in feeling, in enjoyment (perhaps we should not say child, for youth is far more susceptible of the pleasure of life than childhood) Florence was disappointed, and very painfully.

When under the first excitement of conquering inclination, that duty should triumph, there is an infused strength even in trifles such as these; but there never yet was any such self-conquest which was wholly joy, as some good but cold-hearted people declare. There is generally a revulsion of feeling, occasioning a doubt as to whether or not we need have acted as we have done; and then, as all excitement overstrains the nervous system, the blood flows less equally, and affects us mentally, so that depression and dissatisfaction for a while too often follow even a duty done. And so it was with our young heroine; she felt all she had told her father, but now the tormenting thought would come, that perhaps she could have attended to her duties and gone to the ball also; and that she had made a sacrifice, and rejoiced in her strength to do so, when there was really no necessity for it. She was weary

too; for her mother's illness, and her own multiplied duties, had prevented her customary daily walks, and mental recreation; and her head ached—that gnawing nervous pain, so difficult to bear because it is not bad enough to complain of, or do anything to relieve. And so our poor Florence was weak enough, when quite alone, to indulge in a hearty fit of tears; but this was not of long continuance; she very soon conquered what she felt was selfish folly, and hastened down to their little study to attend to her sister's impatient call, and superintend her morning lessons.

But Florence was not to be steadily employed that day; Lady Ida came to inquire after Mrs. Leslie as usual, to introduce her particular friend, Lady Mary Villiers, to the pretty cottage and its interesting inmates, and to carry off Florence for a drive. The pure fresh air, the beautiful country, the freedom from care, and above all the intellectual rest and enjoyment springing from the society of refined and accomplished minds—all did the young girl good, and caused her to converse with her natural liveliness and animation.

"You are right, Ida; Miss Leslie is worthy of your interest; even I allow it," said Lady Mary, when Florence left them; "but I am sorry you have made her love you, widely separated as you must be in so short a time."

"I am not going to remain in Italy for ever Mary; so why should not my interest in Florence continue?"

"Because I have no faith in an interest such as this continuing through time and separation. It is not absence which severs friends, but changes in heart, and mind, and position. You cannot return to England as you leave it; you will have new ties, new interests, which must weaken former ones."

"You believe, then, that absence is really what some poet, I think, called it, 'the grave of love?'"

"No; but that it is very often the grave of sympathy—not with those whose spheres of action and position are the same, as ours are; but fancy you and Florence both in London a few years hence—with interests, duties, occupations, each as distinct as one planet from another.

What can you be to her but a source of yearning and of pain?"

"I cannot tell you at this moment, Mary, but time will show. You know I have many strange fancies, and one is that women do not do half as much as they might do for each other; they are too often influenced by such petty jealousies, detraction, envy—things I abhor. I may still be Florence's friend, even in London, and widely severed in position, as you say we shall be. Now do not look so solemnly incredulous; all things are possible if we would but think so, and exert some degree of energy in bringing them about."

CHAPTER VIII.

A SURPRISE FOR FLORENCE.—THE GIFT.

THE eventful night at length arrived. Mr. Leslie, who had received an invitation from Lord Melford to dine with some other gentlemen at St. John's, went; but all his intended enjoyment was clouded because Florence could not join him. Mrs. Leslie was yet more grieved, reproaching herself for never having thought what Florence might need; forgetting, now that she was almost as well as usual, all the deeply anxious thoughts which had engrossed her, when she anticipated death—anxiety, not for herself, for her trust was fixed on the Rock of ages. But she was a wife and mother; she knew her husband's causes of anxiety almost better than he did himself; and there was one care, peculiarly her own, which rendered the idea of death one of intense suffering; for Minie and Walter it was simply the thought of separation; but for Florence, the most incongruous, the most mysterious emotions were concentrated in one feeling of anxious anguish, which none but her God could penetrate and soothe.

With such reflections, united to intense bodily pain and prostrating weakness, it was no matter of wonder that Lady Ida's ball and the necessary arrangements for

Florence should have entirely escaped her memory till it was too late for the evil to be remedied. The disappointment itself she knew was of no real consequence; but Mrs. Leslie was not one of those harshly-nurtured spirits who trample on the sweet flowers of youthful life without one remorseful pang; she knew how soon, how very soon the lovely buds fade of themselves; and she trembled lest harsher duties should demand in Florence the crushing of youth and all its dreams years before their time. And so full of regret was her caressing manner that evening, that Florence, even had she felt any remaining depression, would have effectually concealed it; but the sweet reward of duty was once more her own, and animated and gay, she speedily proved that the sacrifice was absolutely nothing—when compared to her mother's comfort and enjoyment.

It was the first evening Mrs. Leslie had left her chamber, and resumed her couch in the sitting-room, an event inexpressibly cheering to Florence, who always declared the house was desolate when her mother was upstairs. Once more the sweet carol of Minie's voice enlivened the evening hours; song after song poured forth from the child's lips, with a sweetness, a richness, a purity absolutely thrilling. It was eight o'clock when they closed the piano-forte, and Florence, petitioning a longer vigil for Minie, opened Miss Austin's entertaining "Mansfield Park," and began, at her mother's wish, to read it aloud.

They had been thus employed about half an hour, when a carriage drove up to the gate, and a respectable old dame who had been Minie's nurse, and continued the humble friend of the family, bustled into the apartment, with a comical look of pleasant intelligence, which excited the curiosity not only of the two girls, but of Mrs. Leslie herself. No answer to the varied queries, however, would Nurse Wilmot vouchsafe, but she deliberately drew forth a note, and presented it to Florence, who, with an exclamation of astonishment, tore it open and read as follows:—

"Your father tells me, my dear Florence, that your mother is quite well enough for you to leave her to-night,

and I have therefore sent my carriage for you, and must insist on your donning bonnet and shawl, and coming just as you are. William has orders to bring you to the side entrance, where you know a private staircase leads to my rooms. Do not be frightened at the string of carriages which may throng the front door; your path will be quite invisible. Go directly into my dressing-room, where you will find Alice with all the necessaries for your toilette, and I will come for you when it is completed. I send your dear old nurse, Mrs. Wilmot, who will remain with your mother till to-morrow evening, that you may leave her without any apprehension, for of course you sleep at the Hall. Now do not stay to hesitate; I will *never* forgive you if you disobey me. "IDA."

"Necessaries for my toilette! What can she mean? I have not a single dress at St. John's," was the bewildered speech of Florence, as she concluded; and then, as the real truth seemed to flash upon her through Mrs. Leslie's fond, rejoicing look, she threw her arms around her mother's neck, and burst into tears. But the wild delight of Minie, who, clapping her hands and jumping about the room, insisted that Florence was very foolish to cry, and make her eyes red, when she ought only to be glad, and Mrs. Leslie's caressing sympathy, soon removed all trace of these incomprehensible tears; and hastily shawled and bonnetted by the active care of Mrs. Wilmot, who gossiped all the time of the beautiful things she had seen at St. John's, where she had been since six o'clock, and the kind care of Alice, and the affability of Lady Ida, and how kindly she had spoken of Miss Florence, with an endless etc., Florence was soon ensconced in the carriage. and rolling rapidly to St. John's. It seemed a shorter ride than usual, for her thoughts were very busy, and excessive timidity struggled with pleasure. Alice, with provident kindness, had stationed herself ready to receive and conduct her with all speed to her lady's dressing room.

True dignity was never yet attended by insolence or presumption. Alice had been an inmate of the late Lord Edgemere's family for above eight-and-twenty years, and

every year increased her devotion for the gentle being whose birth she had witnessed, and whom she had tended from her youth. All whom Lady Ida honored with her regard became objects of interest to herself.

Florence was speedily attired in the graceful robe of India muslin, so transparent in its delicate texture as to display the pure white satin folds beneath; the tiny slippers to correspond; the delicate white glove; and every article fitting so admirably, and made so simply, in such perfect accordance with her age and station, that Florence's peculiarly sensitive mind could only feel relieved. Her beautiful hair received a new grace and polish from the skilful hand of Alice; a single white camelia, with its drooping bud, plucked fresh for the occasion, gleamed like a star amid those jetty tresses so purely, so freshly beautiful, it seemed fit emblem of the gentle girl whom it adorned. A chain of beautiful workmanship, with its Sevigné and suspended Maltese cross, the centre of which, as the Sevigné, was simply yet elegantly set with valuable emeralds, was her only ornament; and even from this Florence sensitively shrunk, asking kindly if Lady Ida particularly wished her to wear it. She need not, Alice said, if she did not like; but, as it was intended as a keepsake from her lady to Miss Leslie, she thought Lady Ida would be disappointed if it were not worn; and, touching a spring in the cross as she spoke, a locket was disclosed, containing a braid of dark, chestnut hair, with the letters F. L. from I. V. delicately engraved upon it. The eyes of Florence again glistened, but she made no further objection to having it secured round her throat, playfully answering Alice's unchecked admiration of her appearance by the assurance that it must be all her care, and Lady Ida's kindness, which had caused her to look well, that her own proper self had nothing to do with it whatever.

Unconsciously she remained standing opposite the large pier-glass when Alice had departed, thinking far more of the kindness she had received than of her own graceful figure and sweetly expressive face, of whose real charm she was in truth totally ignorant, for she knew she was not beautiful; and that she possessed intellect and sensi-

bility enough to make a far plainer face attractive, was equally unknown.

"Well, Florence, have I done for you as well as you could have done for yourself?" was the playful address which roused her from her reverie; and, springing forward, Florence could only exclaim, "Oh, Lady Ida, why are you so kind?"

"Why dearest, because it is a real pleasure to think for those who never think of themselves; and just now, that my pleasures are so limited, you must not grudge me this. Now do not look at me half sorrowfully when I mean you to be the very happiest person in the ball-room to-night; you are as awe-struck at my diamonds and satin robe, as you were when I first came down, because I was an earl's daughter. You little simpleton; my rank may be somewhat higher, but what do I exact then—only obedience in all things even to the keeping and wearing that chain and cross for my sake, without any pride in that haughty little spirit rising up against it."

"Haughty! dear Lady Ida? Do not say so."

"Indeed I will, for you know it to be truth; but come, for I must not be missed from the ball-room. Emily's last note told you, did it not? that the idea of *tableaux* was given up till another night, as being incompatible with my uncle's dinner and the ball; so you see you must play your part still, notwithstanding you thought to eschew it so nicely."

Re-assured, happy beyond all expression, even her timidity soothed by Lady Ida's caressing manner, Florence laughingly replied; and they proceeded to the splendidly lighted suite of rooms whence the alternate quadrille and waltz were most inspiritingly sounding. It was the surpassing loveliness, the peculiarly quiet air of real aristocratic dignity, the absence of all, even the faintest approach to affectation or display in Lady Ida, which had struck the eager heart of the young Florence with even more than usual respect, impressing her—as Ida's quick penetration had discovered, even at such a moment of pleasure—with the sorrowful conviction how widely they must be eventually separated by their respective stations

CHAPTER IX.

AN INTRODUCTION.—PRINCIPLE TRIUMPHS OVER INCLINATION.

As Lady Ida and her companion entered the ante-chamber, into which the ball-room opened, a young man, or rather lad, for his open collar and round jacket permitted him no higher title, though an elegant figure and remarkably handsome face rendered him a general object of attraction, hastily pressed forward.

"Frank!" said Lady Ida, greatly surprised, "Why, where have you dropped from? I am really glad to see you, and to-night particularly."

"Your ladyship honors me," was the buoyant reply, with a very graceful bow. "I only arrived two hours ago, and found all the hotel in commotion and excitement, because of the Lady Ida Villiers' ball. I ventured on the plea of old acquaintance, both with Lady Melford and yourself, to come without invitation. Am I excused?"

"Excused and welcome, Frank, as you well know. Where is your father?"

"In Paris still; but as it is the season of merry Easter in my grave quarters, I vowed I would turn truant, and visit my friends in England. After a struggle I gained my point, and finding most of my best friends in Devonshire, followed them, and here I am."

"And as you have come in a time of festivity, we shall all be doubly glad to see you. Florence, will you honor this friend of mine for the next quadrille? But I forget you do not know each other—Miss Leslie, Mr. Francis Howard. That is etiquette,—is it not? Now be as agreeable as you can be, Frank, in return for Miss Leslie's condescension."

The young man laughed gayly, seeming not at all ill pleased with the introduction, his eyes having lingered admiringly on Florence all the time he spoke to Lady Ida

"Lady Melford," whispered Florence. "Will it not be rude if I do not seek her first?"

"I will make your excuse. It will be easier for you t

find a place in the quadrille than my aunt at present," was the reply. "Frank, bring Miss Leslie to me when your dance has been accomplished."

"How am I to find your ladyship?—by a treble file of *cavalier dévoués*, sueing your hand for all the quadrilles of the evening?"

"No, you foolish boy. I am a staid, sober matron for this evening, not intending to dance at all."

"Not dance!" exclaimed young Howard and Florence in such genuine surprise as to excite Lady Ida's mirth.

"Not dance, my young friends. Now away with you both, for my will is like an ocean rock, not to be shaken."

Lady Ida stood a moment, silently watching the effect that Florence Leslie's unexpected appearance would produce; not a little pleased that the purse-proud Oakland family were standing so near as not only to have seen Florence's *début*, leaning familiarly on her arm, but to hear all that had passed, even her final command to young Howard to bring Florence to her after the dance.

"Did you hear that?" whispered Miss Maria to Miss Elizabeth. "Well to be sure!—titled ladies are easily pleased. Who could have thought of that poor proud Florence getting into such favor?"

"And look what a beautiful chain and cross she has," was Miss Elizabeth's reply. "I did not think her worth such a thing; but her dress, who ever heard of any one coming to such a ball as this in plain white muslin? But of course, poor thing, she could not afford any thing better." And she looked with yet greater satisfaction on her own amber-colored satin, flounced and furbelowed to the knee.

An irresistible smile stole to Lady Ida's lip as these whispered remarks reached her ear, half longing for them to know that it was her own much vaunted taste they were decrying; and, scarcely able to meet with her wonted courtesy the eager cringing speeches with which, as she passed them, they saluted her.

Some, however, there were who were really glad to see Florence, and amiable enough to forgive the favor she enjoyed; nay more, to remark how well she looked, and to witness without envy Emily Melford's joyous greeting, and to see the young men of the Hall approach with

eagerly extended hand, and claim her successively as their partner; while others lost half the pleasure, the triumph of being invited by Lady Ida Villiers to a ball because Florence Leslie was there too, and evidently in high favor. Alas! for poor human nature.

"Will you come with me, Mr. Leslie? I have a lovely flower I want to show you," said Lady Ida playfully, laying her hand on that gentleman's arm, as he stood talking with her uncle, and other gentlemen, at some distance from the dancers.

"Willingly," he replied, observing, as he offered her his arm, that he thought the conservatory lay in an opposite direction.

"So it does, my dear sir; but it is not your love of flowers I am going to gratify just now; unless you can find any charm in a white camelia wreathed in a fair maiden's hair! The flower I mean has just accepted Frederic's arm. Do you know her? Or shall I introduce you?"

"Florence!" exclaimed the delighted father, in a tone that gratified all Lady Ida's benevolent intentions most completely. "And looking so well—so happy! What magic has your ladyship used?"

"Wait till I give you Florence back again: I intend to tell you nothing, now, nor will I permit her. It is enough you are satisfied that my power is more efficient than you thought. You may greet your father, Florence, but that is all I permit now," she added gayly, as, escorted both by Frederic Melford and Frank Howard, Florence hastily approached.

"Ida! what can you want with Miss Leslie? If you are so determined not to dance, at least lay no prohibition on her; but here is Frank—troublesome fellow—will not give her up to me till he has given her back to you; and she says she cannot till she has spoken with my mother."

"Well, I promise you I will not detain her long. Go, and pay your *devoirs* to some other lady, and come back for her after the next dance. There is a waltz, fortunately for you; so since Florence does not waltz, you can spare her."

"The next, then, remember Miss Leslie?" Florence laughingly assented

"And after Melford and his brother, may I claim again?" asked young Howard earnestly.

"I believe I am engaged."

"The next, then?"

Florence assented with a bright smile. Howard bowed and retreated.

"What! you will have such compassion on Frank's round jacket and open collar, as to honor him twice, when so many dress-coats are round you, Florence, you really are a novice. Emily would abuse your bad taste," laughingly observed Lady Ida.

"Oh, he is so agreeable; he knows so much about Paris and Italy—dear Italy! Besides, indeed, I scarcely think about my partners; dancing is so delightful in itself; though certainly, when they are so pleasant as Mr. Howard and your cousins, it is more delightful still."

"And so you forgive the round jacket?"

"Because it is the only part of the boy about him."

"I admire your discrimination; he is much more worth talking to than many double his age. His father, Lord Glenville, is a strange, stern man, and I often pity Frank's domestic trials; but his gay spirit carries him through them all, and he is happy in spite of them."

Lady Melford received her most kindly, making many inquiries after her mother, which enabled Florence to overcome the diffidence she felt, as she encountered so many inquiring glances, not from Lady Melford s resident guests alone, but of many proud families in the neighborhood, who generally passed her with very supercilious notice. The benevolent countenance of Lady Edgemere attracted her at once, and so pleased was she with that lady's flattering notice and encouraging conversation, that she was almost sorry when Frederic Melford came to claim her.

"So you will not follow Mary's example, Ida? On my honor I feel inclined to scold you even now," said Lord Edgemere, in a latter part of the evening, as cavalier after cavalier approached his former ward, intreating her to dance, and each received the same courteous but firm reply. "All my powers of oratory, Mary's of persuasion, Lady Edgemere's of argument, your uncle's of satire,

your aunt's of irritation, your cousin's of torment—have all been exhausted in vain. You laugh at my lengthy catalogue—how unfeeling, triumphing over this waste of breath! Ida, what a report I will write Edmund! Now, there is the smile vanished, as if his very name demanded the banishment of joy. You little incomprehensible enigma, when shall I solve you?"

"Will not his name solve my reason for not dancing?" inquired Lady Ida, in a voice so low and quivering, that Lord Edgemere, even while he answered jestingly, pressed the delicate hand which rested on his arm.

"Truly it will not, for Edmund loved to watch your graceful movements in the dance, even when he could not join in it himself."

"And while I am dancing, listening, perhaps, to a dozen unmeaning speeches, attracting the attention of every eye, because, of course, as Lady Ida Villiers, I might not hope to go through a crowded quadrille unremarked—he may be ill, and in lonely sorrow, the void in his faithful heart unfilled, even by his most-loved studies, dreaming of me, and my promise to be his alone! And should I be fulfilling this promise, attracting the notice, the applause of a crowd? Oh, Lord Edgemere, is it strange that I *cannot* dance?" She spoke with strong, though suppressed emotion, and Lord Edgemere at once entered into her feelings. Quickly recovering, she said cheerfully, "You will ask me, with these feelings, why I gave the ball at all? Because I could not bear to be so selfish as to refuse Emily such a trifle; and those who paid me such continued attention certainly demanded some return."

"You have done very wisely, my dear Ida. To conciliate is so infinitely more agreeable than to offend, that it is worth some sacrifice of individual will. You have gratified many; soothed, perhaps, offended pride; given scope to kindly feelings—"

"I fear to unamiable ones, too," interposed Lady Ida.

"Perhaps so; for when was there a ball whose ordeal every one could pass unscathed? Yet still there appears to me a larger share of happiness in these rooms than in some of our crowded assemblies in London. I am sure, if

ever face spoke truth, there is one person perfectly happy; look at Miss Leslie now."

In the midst of a gay throng Florence was standing, listening, and sometimes joining in the merry conversation of Emily Melford and her attendant beaux, with such sparkling animation lighting up every feature that it was impossible to pass her unremarked. Just at the moment that Lord Edgemere had directed Lady Ida's attention towards her, one of Strauss's most inspiring waltzes struck up, and several couples were instantly formed.

"Come, Florence, one turn—only one; have pity on Alfred, who has been asking you so long; and he is no stranger. You may waltz with him," intreated Emily, ere she departed with her partner, and her brother was not slow to follow up the hint.

"You really must waltz, Miss Leslie; it will be a treat to have a genuine lover of dancing to waltz with. You say you love dancing, and yet not waltz; indeed you do not know what dancing is—ask Emily—ask Lady Mary."

"Will she stand firm?" whispered Lord Edgemere to his companion, as Florence, shrinking back, intreated to be excused, resisting even Emily's declaration, that she did not know how ridiculous she appeared refusing to do what everybody else did.

"You know you can waltz, Florence," she persisted, "and much better than I do."

"Then it is not incapacity, Miss Leslie; indeed you have no excuse. Is not that music enough to inspire you—even were you fainting with fatigue?"

"Indeed it is; and I assure you I am not in the least fatigued. I own I have waltzed in sport very often, but not here—not now indeed—indeed Mr. Melford you must excuse me."

"But why, Florence? I assure you it is quite an English dance now. There is not the least shadow of harm in it," interposed Lady Mary. But Florence was firm, and carried her point, although Alfred Melford declared he would leave her alone as a punishment, as a post for the waltzers, instead of taking her to a *chaperon;* and he knew she would not have courage to go by herself.

"You will do no such thing, Alfred; for Florence is my

charge, and I am here to redeem it," interposed Lady Ida, coming forward; and Florence clung to her arm with such an expression of relief that young Melford laughed immoderately, a laugh in which he was joined as gayly by herself.

"Oh, if Ida upholds you in your perverseness, Miss Florence, there is no hope; so I will make my parting bow, and vanish," he said, and darted off to join the waltzers with some less scrupulous partner.

"I give you joy of your conquest, Miss Leslie," said Lord Edgemere, smiling kindly. "If incapacity and subsequent real disinclination had incited your firmness, you would have achieved no conquest at all; but when principle triumphs over inclination, I honor it, even in such a small thing as a waltz."

Florence blushed deeply, but not with pain; wondering how Lord Edgemere could so exactly have divined the truth—for no true lover of dancing (if such a person in these days of art can be found) ever yet listened to an inspiring waltz, without the longing desire to join in it.

"Do you waltz, Lady Ida?" she asked.

"Not very often; I have done so when it would have seemed greater affectation to refuse, than love of display to do so. But I am not very fond of it; it is an exercise too exciting, too absorbing, ever to be a favorite amongst genuine English women; and with your passionate love of dancing, Florence, you are right to resist all persuasions, and not waltz. All Emily's sage resolutions to that effect have, I perceive, melted into air. I am glad you are firmer."

Florence was satisfied.

To enter into all the delights of the ball would be impossible. Suffice it that to far the greater number within those halls, it was perfect enjoyment. Nothing seemed wanting: even the most exacting were satisfied, nay charmed with the attention they received from their distinguished hostess.

Lady Ida left her memory as a bright star in the hearts of every one present, various as were their dispositions, their characters, and feelings. "What availed such 'golden opinions' from those she might never meet again?" the

skeptic and the selfish may demand. Little in actual deed; but much, much in that account where the smallest act of kindness and benevolence is registered forever.

Pleasures, however transporting, unhappily cannot last. No chain—be it of gold, or pearl, or flowers—can bind the stubborn wings of time, and bid him loiter on his way. He spurns the fetter, darkly, sternly, rushing on; and bright indeed must be the joys which fade not beneath his step. The festive scene at length closed. Not indeed till the blue light of morning struggled to regain dominion over the earth. Carriage after carriage rolled from the gates, bearing with them for the most part memories of pleasure often recalled with a sigh; until at last, Lord Melford's family and their resident guests remained sole occupants of St. John's.

CHAPTER X.

SEPARATION.—THE CLOUD GATHERS.—A CHARACTER TO BE REMEMBERED.

BELIEVING with the wise personage, who wrote, said, or left as legacy, the sage adage that

"Trifles make the sum of human life;"

and also, that it is in trifles, infinitely clearer than in great deeds, that the actual character is displayed, we have lingered, perhaps too long, on the first part of our narrative, hoping that our readers may feel some interest in, and judge somewhat of the character of, our youthful heroine; destined, ere the sober gray of life came on, to figure in widely different scenes.

The perfect happiness of Florence, she herself knew, must very soon be clouded; and she roused every unselfish feeling of her nature to save her from weak repining, or fretful regret. Early in May, Lord Melford's family were to quit St. John's. This, though a privation, (for Florence liked Emily, in spite of the wide dissimilarity of their characters and tastes,) was one easily borne compared to the severer trial awaiting her in the departure of Lord

Edgemere's party towards the end of April, taking Lady Ida Villiers with them.

"Remember, Florence, if it should happen that in any thing you need me, if my friendship or influence can be of any service to you, write to me without scruple," had been Lady Ida's parting address, in a tone of sincerity which Florence never forgot. "You are very young, but with such a mother your character will not change; and if I meet again the Florence Leslie whom I leave, trust me you will find me still the same, however the kind world may tell you that our respective ranks place an insuperable barrier between us."

Florence had tried to smile, but found the effort vain.

Lady Ida departed—and oh! how sad and lonely did every pursuit and pleasure, for a brief while, seem. But she had gone to happiness; and though when Florence received a few hurried lines from her, telling her she was on the eve of quitting England, and in a very few weeks expected to join Mr. St. Maur, who was already at Nice, the consciousness of the many miles of sea and land dividing them pressed heavily on her affectionate heart, she could and did rejoice that the time of probation was at an end, and Lady Ida might indeed be happy with him whom she so faithfully and devotedly loved.

From Emily Melford, who was her constant correspondent, she heard all further particulars of the happy termination of the voyage and journey; and next of her marriage, for St. Maur was so wonderfully recovered there was no occasion for further delay; and then, by degrees, of their fixing their residence for some few years in a beautiful villa in the neighborhood of Rome, and that they were as happy as mortals might be.

Not long after Lady Ida left Devonshire, some changes took place in Florence Leslie's domestic life, which must not be passed unnoticed. We have said or hinted, that Mr. Leslie was not a rich man. Nay, for the rank which his birth and education entitled him to fill, he was decidedly poor. Some few months before Lady Ida came to Devonshire, a friend had brought to his recollection a long-neglected law-suit, which had been commenced by the grandfather of Mr. Leslie for the recovery of an estate,

which it was generally supposed had been alienated from the family by some chicanery of the supposed heir and his lawyer.

William Leslie, the person then concerned, died, before much more than preliminaries had been arranged. His son, an easy country gentleman, satisfied with the moderate fortune he possessed, never even examined the papers left to his charge, leaving his son, at his death, if not affluent, at least a comfortable competence. With the present Mr. Leslie, however, business had been unfortunate; and he retired to Devonshire, in compliance with the wishes of his wife, to economize, till Walter's dawning manhood might require their home to be in London.

He had sometimes heard his father speak of an estate which ought to be their own, but regarded it little, until just before the opening of our tale. The estate became again without a master, and many old friends of Mr. Leslie urged his putting forth his claims, as well as those of the supposed heir-at-law. Mr. Leslie was so far ambitious, that for the interest of his children he would have done and risked much; and eagerly seeking the long-forgotten papers, he employed himself actively in looking for a lawyer, of sufficient skill and probity, to undertake the delicate business. In vain Mrs. Leslie, far more clear-sighted than himself, intreated him to forego his claims. It appeared to her, from the papers of the former lawsuit, which she had attentively perused, that their claims were not merely remote but unfounded; or at least, not so well authenticated and proved as to ensure success. She reminded him of the expense which the carrying on the suit must occasion; she intreated him, with all the eloquence of affection, to remain contented with their present mode of life. They were not like others, absolutely dependent on exertion or some lucky chance for sufficiency. They needed economy for a few years, certainly; but they had capital, which if not drained by unnecessary calls, would amply provide for their daughters, and settle Walter in business, where he might carve out his own fortune; a far happier lot than awaited those to whom fortune descended without exertion or ambition of their own. Mr. Leslie might have been convinced, had there not been

those troublesome meddlers, misnamed friends, who spoke of henpecked husbands, and the egregious folly of having competence and wealth and distinction awaiting them, yet failing in the mental courage and independent spirit for the exertion necessary to obtain them.

These arguments had a powerful advocate in Mr. Leslie's own inclination. There was much, he felt convinced, in his son beyond what met the common eye, and he shrunk from binding him to mere mechanical employment; for him, beyond even the interest of his daughters, he longed for wealth, that Walter's uncommonly gifted mind might have scope to develop itself, and that those higher spheres of employment to which his inclination prompted might be pursued, without the cold and sordid calculations which inevitably attend mere competence.

There was much in these considerations nearly and sadly to affect Mrs. Leslie. Yet she urged that, economically as they at present lived, this same end might still be accomplished; intreating him to recollect that Walter's interests might be far more irretrievably wrecked by the loss of the suit, and its attendant heavy drains on their little capital. But Mr. Leslie never dreamed of loss. He felt so convinced in his own mind of the justice of his claims, so fully persuaded, that all the necessary expenses would be but as dust in the balance compared to the possession of a rich and unincumbered estate, that he laughed aside all her fears, declaring that the papers had been examined by an exceedingly clever lawyer, and pronounced as quite sufficient to authorize his claims, and in his hands accordingly the suit was placed.

We must pass lightly over the next few years in the life of our heroine, mentioning only those circumstances necessary for the clear elucidation of our narrative.

Florence Leslie was not a character to fall from the promise of high and noble virtue which the early age of seventeen had appeared to give. The impression of Lady Ida's faultless qualities and most endearing character could not fade from an imagination ardent as her own. It was continually before her eyes, inciting her to many of those trifling acts of self-denial and moral strength, which might otherwise have been unperformed.

At seventeen a girl's character is seldom fully formed. It is the first opening of life ; its first susceptibility of enjoyment ; its first consciousness of power, of feeling, of perfect happiness, unalloyed even by those whisperings of our innate corruption, to which we only awake by degrees. All things seem as bright, as fond, as innocent, as our own minds : love ! love breathes around us in nature as in man : we see nothing of the universal curse, but all of the universal love ! We may hear of sin and suffering, but they are things afar off, and of little moment. Some deem childhood the happiest season of life ; but oh ! surely it is youth.

Childhood is but a dream, containing, indeed, the germs of after being, not the flowers themselves. It is the threshold of spring, but not spring itself. No ! spring, like youth, comes in the sudden flood of sunshine — kindles with magic touch the senseless seed into the fragrant flower—converts the laughter of the moment into the deeper smile of the heart—the weary toil of task and restraint into the springy freedom, the buoyant hope, the bright unfading glory of life—awakened, beautiful existence !

But even as it is the season of guilelessness, of joy, of good that thinketh no evil, so is it of impression. The heart and mind, like wax, are moulded to whatever form the hand of affection points ; and happy is it for those whose first friendships, whose early associations, are with those capable of impressing there nothing but the good. We are writing generally ; but perhaps it is only to those peculiarly ardent and clinging dispositions of which Florence Leslie was one, to whom these remarks are applicable. There are girls, even of seventeen, so wrapt in self, that the material of the heart is of stone instead of flesh ; and others again are content to flutter through the brief period of existence, with neither strength of impulse nor power of imagination, and consequently laugh at all things which speak of thought or feeling.

Gradually the character of Florence deepened—her intellect expanded ; and as the girl merged into the woman, if her wild and joyous spirits were in part subdued, there was a truth, a firmness of principle, a powerful sense of

religion, a yet deeper capability of *suffering* and *enduring*, which, to those capable of appreciating, or even of understanding her, would have rendered her at twenty still more deserving of love. But Emily Melford was right. It did, indeed, appear as if by the encouragement of these lofty and glowing feelings, her doom was to stand alone, to meet with none to whom she could lay bare her whole heart; with few who did not smile at aught of sentiment or action higher than was common; and so at length it was only within her own circle that Florence Leslie was really known.

There was one person, however, who, through a stern, forbidding aspect, prevented many from thinking aloud before her, could yet (strange to say) afford to love, and had sense to appreciate our youthful heroine. This was a Mrs. Rivers, a distant relation of Mr. Leslie, with whom intercourse had been continually kept up, which was more intimately renewed some little time after Lady Ida's departure.

The peculiarly chilling character of this lady had been formed by a most extraordinary train of deceit and falsehood in persons whom she had loved and trusted. From having been one of the most affectionate and most confiding beings, she became the coldest and most forbidding —from trusting all, she trusted none; not at least in appearance, for it was shrewdly suspected that a young girl whom she had adopted, and to whom it was supposed she would leave all her property, which was considerable, possessed her affections in the warmest degree. This orphan, by name Flora Leslie, was the only remaining relative of Mr. Leslie who bore his name: relative, indeed, she could hardly be called, as their cousinship was five or six degrees removed, though the similarity of name often caused the supposition of a much nearer consanguinity.

The residence of Mrs. Rivers was near Winchester, and thither Florence was repeatedly invited as a companion to Flora, with whom, however, she speedily found she had not a thought in common; finding much more to excite her interest and affection in Mrs. Rivers herself. To her she was so invariably attentive and respectful, that the

lady might have descended from her pedestal of coldness and pride, and trusted once again, had she not still feared to find those endearing qualities deceitful as before. That Flora Leslie was of a most unamiable temper, possessing a remarkable scarcity of attractive or endearing qualities, was her safeguard in the opinion of Mrs. Rivers, particularly as the young lady had hypocrisy enough ever to bewail these faults, and to pretend to correct them; and thus, by the most consummate art, she deceived by a completely contrary process to her predecessors. Florence speedily penetrated this, and turned from her with loathing; but how might her lips warn Mrs. Rivers of the precipice on which her last attachment seemed to stand. How descend to so mean a deed as to poison her mind against an orphan dependent on her for support. She neither could nor would act thus; contenting herself rather with continuing her simple true-hearted kindness towards Mrs. Rivers; often sacrificing her own inclinations and favorite duties to comply with her request, and make some stay at Woodlands.

CHAPTER XI.

WALTER.—A PROPOSAL.—A FATHER'S DEATH-BED.

We ought, perhaps, to have mentioned in its proper place, that Mr. Leslie's desire to be on the spot to superintend the proceeding of this lawsuit, urged him to give up his beautiful little retreat in Devonshire, and reside in the metropolis; thus materially increasing his expenditure, though the family lived as economically as possible, and as materially decreasing their domestic comforts and enjoyments. Mr. Leslie was far too honorable to live beyond his *present* means, because he confidently trusted his *future* would bring wealth; and when economy must be consulted, and observers of that economy are of birth and education, London does not possess one quarter of the happiness or the true enjoyment of the country. There,

pleasures the most innocent, the most healthful, the most reviving, await the economist at every turn, without the smallest tax upon his finances. Not thus is it in the metropolis. It has indeed many avenues of improvement, of pleasure, of true enjoyment; but they are for those to whom money is no object, time of little value; not for that noble set of economists, who, rather than indulge in the *expense* attendant upon pleasure, would forego it altogether.

Mrs. Leslie's delicate health had prevented their keeping much society even in Devonshire. In London they kept still less; for in the environs of this great city, as in the city itself, people may live next door to each other for years, and never know more than their respective names; and, therefore, though in a populous neighborhood the Leslies lived in comparative solitude.

It so happened that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Leslie had any near relation, nor even connections, both having been only children, and the latter, in fact, an orphan from her earliest years.

All these things considered, it was no very great wonder that London to Florence Leslie was in truth a prison, compared with the joys, the freedom, and, above all, the associations of the country. Yet she was happy, for her mind could create its own resources, and outward excitement she needed not. Her domestic circle was sufficient to call forth all the affection, the animation of her nature The opening mind, the bird-like joyousness of Minie, the far higher character of Walter, even the anxiety his delicate health occasioned, bound her closer and closer to them both; till with the vivid memories of Lady Ida, and the lively correspondence of Emily Melford, which, marvellous to relate, continued the length of two full years, Florence's simple nature needed no more. She did sometimes think it strange, that during the three months which the Melfords passed in town, Emily should never make any exertion to see her, or renew the intercourse between the families; but for the first few years, Florence was too happy in herself to feel it as neglect. She had no particular need of their kindness, so did not miss it. Alas! it is only in the time of sorrow, only when we most need

kindness, that we awake to the bitter consciousness of coldness and neglect.

Meanwhile time passed. Two, and nearly three years, and Mr. Leslie's lawsuit appeared making no progress whatever towards a favorable completion; calling indeed, for multiplied expenses, which he met willingly, because unalterably convinced that success would attend him at last; a conviction shared with all the buoyant anticipation of youth by his son, to whom, much against Mrs. Leslie's consent, his hopes and expectations had been imparted.

Walter looked not to riches as means of sensual pleasure and intemperate indulgences. Inheriting, unhappily, the sickly constitution of his mother, a severe illness, soon after he was fifteen, deprived him of all taste for boyish pleasures, and gave him but one great desire to become mentally great. Tastes and powers suddenly awakened within him never felt before. He had always been remarkably intellectual; but with the sudden conception of poetry, painting, sculpture, all those links of a higher, more etherial nature, his former joyous spirits changed to a sensitiveness, an almost morbid susceptibility of feeling.

He gave the whole energy of mind and heart to his studies. It mattered not what subject they embraced; he mastered them with an ease, a capability of comprehension, which caused both his father and himself to laugh at the fancy, that by too much application he was injuring his already but too precarious health.

Mrs. Leslie's anxious spirit often trembled; but it was more at his faultless temper, his confiding and affectionate heart, his extraordinary sense of religious trust and dependence. Yet, oh! how could a mother, as she looked upon and traced the many virtues of her boy, wish it had been otherwise? How breathe the secret dread, that he seemed but *lent* to earth?

During Lady Ida's intimacy with Florence, Walter had been at school in London; but he had never been happy there: either the close air did not agree with him, or the regular and somewhat confined routine of lessons and exercises cramped his energies, and permitted no vent to

his higher talents. After his severe illness, he, of course, remained at home, studying of his own accord, and with little assistance of masters. At seventeen, the air of the north being recommended, Mr. Leslie placed him, to his great delight, with a clergyman in Westmoreland; and there it was that all his natural endowments in poetry and painting burst upon him with a flash, a brilliancy, lighting up his whole being with new powers, and new life; banishing all trace of too morbid sensitiveness, or too depressing gloom, and bringing in their stead such a glowing sense of joy, such a consciousness of power, that even the desire of wealth lost all its strength, for he believed he possessed gifts within him which would make their own way, compel a world to acknowledge them, and wreath his humble name with the bright garland of immortal renown. Alas! poor boy, he knew not how much more than to other minds is independence necessary for the happiness of genius.

Florence had just completed her twentieth year, when, to her great astonishment, she received through her father, an offer of marriage, from a highly respectable young man, whom she had met now and then at Woodlands, but whose attentions she had never deemed any thing more than the courtesy of the hour. Mr. Leslie was unusually urgent in forwarding young Sedley's suit, more so than Florence could at all comprehend. It needed all her firmness, all her eloquence, all her caresses, to win him over to her views, and obtain his consent for the decided dismissal of her admirer.

He said that she knew not the advantage it would be, almost the necessity there existed for her to enter early into a respectable matrimonial engagement; an argument she could not understand. True, she said that she knew if the lawsuit were unfortunately lost, his fortune would be materially diminished; but could he think that she would shrink from aught of privation shared with her family? rather she would remain to work for them, to save their beautiful and childlike Minie all necessity to quit her home. She could not enter the holy engagement of matrimony, without feeling either respect or love for him whom she must solemnly vow to love, honor, and

obey; she could not marry simply for wordly advantages. Mr. Leslie said it was not to mere worldly views he referred, but then checked himself, agitated to a degree yet more startlingly incomprehensible to his daughter, more particularly as her mother shared it. Terrified, she knew not wherefore, she threw herself on Mrs. Leslie's neck, exclaiming in extreme emotion:

"If your happiness, your interests, my beloved parents, are in any way concerned in this intended marriage, only tell me, and I will school my spirit till I can make the sacrifice; only tell me, do not deceive me; does this alliance concern your welfare, as well as the supposed advantages to myself? does it affect you in any way? Tell me but the truth—the whole truth—do not terrify me by mysteries which I cannot solve; say but the word, if indeed it be for you."

"Florence, my child! it was but for yourself I spoke," replied her father, for Mrs. Leslie could but strain the weeping girl to her heart in silence; "solemnly I pledge my word, I thought but of your interests, your happiness, and welcomed this offer as insuring you an independent home and station, which neither circumstance nor accident could affect."

"But why should I need these things more than others, father? why should you banish me from your hearth—your name?"

It was a very simple question, but Mr. Leslie's answer was, as if it said more to his wife and to himself than she had meant. He caught her convulsively in his arms, passionately exclaiming—

"You are right, my blessed child! quite, quite right. Why, indeed, should I banish you from my name and hearth? No—no—you shall never change them, save for those you may love better. Florence, darling! forgive your father I have been too urgent, but it was for you, my child, only for you."

And hastily releasing her, he quitted the room, leaving Florence in a state of such indefinable dread, that her mother compelled herself to calmness to soothe her, assuring her that they had but spoken for her good; her father's interests were in no ways affected, and that she

knew a little thing disturbed him now. Florence wept away her emotion on the bosom of her beloved mother, and Mr. Leslie's resumed calmness, when they again met, removed every lingering fear.

"Does she suspect? Have I ruined her peace forever? Mary—Mary! why have I not your control?" was Mr. Leslie's agitated address to his wife, when all but themselves had retired to rest.

"She suspects nothing, dearest Edward, save that your love for her is even stronger than she believed it; but oh, for the sake of our sweet girl's peace, bid her not to wed again. It seems as if that gentle heart were mercifully preserved from all love save for us, to spare me the bitter agony of giving her to another with the truth untold; the dark alternative of persisting in that which is not, or ruining her peace for ever. You do not feel this, and therefore believe that marriage would give her greater security than remaining with us; but oh, my husband, do not urge it again. An all-seeing Providence is around us. Let us believe he specially watches over her sweet innocence, and by keeping her thus from all love, guards her from dangers, from misery I dare not speak."

Mr. Leslie seemed convinced and affected; but whether, indeed, he would have followed his wife's advice, could never be known; for, two short months after this event, he was attacked by a violent illness, terminating so suddenly and fatally, that Walter had barely time to travel post to London, called thither by a letter from Florence in agony conjuring him to come to them without a moment's delay, ere the fond husband and affectionate father breathed his last.

Of all deaths, a sudden one is the most dreadful, the most agonizing to the survivors. It is said, death, whenever it comes, is sudden; a shock always stunning, always overwhelming. Perhaps it is so; but when only one week intervenes between life and death, one little week severs ties of years, hides under the cold damp earth features which beamed upon us in health and joy from every accustomed haunt; when the beloved is removed directly from his domestic circle to the narrow grave, missed from his usual seat, not to be found in some other, which, though

painful, (if a couch of suffering,) yet becomes dear, but, missed, to be remembered only as gone forever; when no intervening period of dependence on the part of the sufferer, of unremitting attention and increased affection from the beloved ones, has taken place, and (as it were) partially prepared us for the last dread change, the final separation; when none of these things take place, oh, who may speak the agonies of death!

And all this was felt by Mrs. Leslie and her children. They had had no time to fear, still less to hope, and it was long ere they could realize that one so ardently beloved indeed had passed away forever. The extremity of Mrs Leslie's anguish none knew but Him in whose ear in the watches of the night it had been poured. Her illness, her uncomplaining patience had bound her more closely than common to him, and his almost womanly care and gentleness through her long years of suffering excited no common love; and bodily disease itself seemed for the while subdued, conquered by this sudden and most agonizing mental affliction. She had left her couch to attend his dying bed; day and night she moved not from his pillow, save at the moment of Walter's arrival, for she dreaded the effect of the shock upon him. And not alone was it the husband of her love, the gentle soother of her painful couch, whom she had to mourn. There was a secret tie between them, calling for all the devotion, all the gratitude of woman's heart. In the first year of their marriage, he had granted a boon, a weighty boon; one, perhaps, that none other but Edward Leslie could have granted, and never from that hour evinced regret that he had done so. And now that dread secret was all her own, only her own; and its heavy weight appeared to increase the bitter anguish of her husband's loss.

At the moment Mrs. Leslie left the pillow of the dying to meet her son, Florence alone stood beside his bed. His eyes were closed; the livid hue of death had stolen over his features, and the poor girl bent over him, stunned, motionless, unconscious that scorching tears were slowly rolling down her checks, and falling upon his. He opened his eyes languidly, and tried feebly to draw her to him, and as she laid her head on his bosom, kissing again and

again his sunken cheek, he whispered in broken and disjointed sentences:

"Florence, my child! my precious child! bless—bless you. You are indeed my daughter. Minie is not dearer. Love—love your mother, darling; cherish her, care for her as you have done. She has more than common claim for gratitude. Florence—darling—bless——"

And his voice had sunk from exhaustion, so as to be wholly inarticulate, though his lips still moved as if he spoke. Again and again those words returned to Florence—the feeble tone, the look of death haunted her; but there was no mystery attached to them, they seemed to her but the last warning accents of that parental love, which had so long blessed her with the guidance of a friend as well as father. With more than usual claims for love and gratitude, she recalled her mother's years of suffering, which yet had never checked her devotion to her children, and she compared that affectionate devotedness with the fashionable selfishness and culpable neglect of others whom she knew, and she felt she had indeed a double incentive to duty and affection. She knelt by the dead body of her father, and secretly vowed to make her mother the first object of her life, and then only felt relieved from the weight even of love which her father's last words had left.

CHAPTER XII.

FILIAL LOVE.—WALTER SEEKS EMPLOYMENT.—ABILITY AND INTEREST.

MR. LESLIE'S sudden death had, of course, left all his worldly affairs in confusion. Depending entirely on the success of his lawsuit, and believing from his usual good health, that many years of life were still before him, he had left no will, nor any instructions as to the division of his still untouched property. The examination of his papers Mrs. Leslie took upon herself. There were indeed no debts to startle her, but as she had long anticipated, considerable law expenses, which had very materially de-

creased his income. To withdraw all further prosecution of the suit was now impossible, for much as Mrs. Leslie in secret might still have wished it, but yet hallowed as it now seemed by its association with the dead and by the interests of the living, she would not perchance have drawn back, even if she could.

On Walter's delicate frame and sensitive spirit, this loss of his almost idolized father had at first produced such painful effects, as greatly to alarm his affectionate family. He was, however, effectually roused, when he became aware of his mother's determination to divide the little property equally between her children, without reserving the smallest portion for herself. Respectfully, but positively he declared that this should not be. It was no position for a parent, and one like herself. Rather would he feel himself and his sisters utterly dependent upon her, than so completely to reverse the law of nature and of filial feeling. His sisters said the same, and inexpressibly affected, Mrs. Leslie was compelled to submit.

Little did she know the further intentions of her children. That Walter and Florence never rested, scarcely slept, till with the assistance of a friend, one learned in the law, though no practitioner, they had secured her little portion upon herself, binding themselves as representatives of their deceased parent, and consequently pledging themselves to answer all demands of the impending suit. This accomplished, both were comparatively relieved, but Walter still felt that his task was not yet done.

It was one evening, about six weeks after Mr. Leslie's death, that Mrs. Leslie found herself alone with her son. A favorite work was open before him, but his head had gradually sunk upon his hands, and many minutes passed, and still he did not raise it.

"Walter, my own Walter!"

"Mother!" he threw himself with a sudden impulse on her neck, and she heard him sob.

"My boy, it was the will of a gracious Providence that he should go from us. Oh, we must not resist by too long, too unresigned a sorrow. I know what he was to you, my child—to us all—but——"

"Mother, it is not only for my father I mourn. Oh mother, mother, I am a weak, sinful wretch—knowing what is right, and having no strength of myself to do it."

"Who has strength of himself, my child? Who can have it, unless infused—sought for by prayer and action?"

"Yes, mother, action as well as prayer, and it is there I fail. I have sought it in prayer, but not in action; but I will mother, trust me I will."

"But what will you, my Walter? I know that there is even more that depresses you than the anguish which we have mutually borne, something peculiarly your own. If I cannot remove, I may share it, and so lessen its burden. Tell it me then, my child."

And after a moment's pause, Walter did pour every anxious thought and inward struggle into his mother's ear; and as he concluded he looked earnestly on his mother's face, and its expression was as he expected.

"You think with me," he said: "you would not have me wait till this law-suit is decided, to form my future plans. You think with me."

"In our present situation, my child, I cannot think otherwise. Yet, is it impossible to unite inclination and profession? Why must you give up those pursuits, not only naturally dear, but hallowed by the recollection of your father's indulged love?"

"Mother, I will tell you. I know that many would deem me a romantic visionary, but my longing desire is to tread the path of fame, by the pen of literature, or the pencil of the artist—nay, perchance, to unite the two, and rank high, as others have done before me: but to do this needs years of patient labor. I would not come before my country, an unfledged stripling. I could not bear the lash of criticism. No; either with the pen or pencil, there must be *genius* marked. I would not have it said '*in time* he will do well;' I would study under efficient masters, be sure of my position, and then assume it, and feel I have not lived in vain."

He ceased abruptly, reading his mother's tearful sympathy in the trembling pressure of her hands; but the glow passed from his beautiful features.

"But this is folly," he continued. "Mother, dearest

your Walter will prove himself worthy of his father and of you. My sisters shall not miss their father while their brother lives."

"But, my Walter, bodily weakness as well as mental taste disincline you for the exertion you propose."

"No, mother, if health will bear up against the labor of mind, or rather that which men term mental labor—for I have felt it not—will it not against mere mechanical employment? Do not fear me, mother; I am happier already, having spoken; and I shall be happier still, when, by the performance of my duty, I can add to the comfort of my sisters and yourself,"—and throwing himself on his knees before his mother, he kissed away her tears, and talked cheerfully of other things, till the widow smiled again.

Unhappily for Walter's real interests, the friends he consulted were not of the class which, appreciating his high endowments, would give them the encouragement they needed. Almost as rare as genius itself, is (perhaps from their near connection)—

"The power
Of feeling where true genius lies."

And that power is not to be found amongst those who, accustomed to worldly thoughts and interests from early boyhood, and taught to consider amassing money the *ne plus ultra* of human felicity, have neither time nor inclination for any thing else. Mr. Leslie's few acquaintances were of this worldly class; and several times he had been accused of folly, by fostering, as he did, what were called Walter's excessive indolence and romance.

Amongst these, Walter was of course not likely to meet with the expensive intellect and active benevolence which he so much needed. When he communicated his wishes to obtain some employment, he was greeted with a congratulatory shake of the hand, that he had awakened at length with spirit to be a man, and to throw off all the idle fancies his poor father's weak indulgence had so egregiously encouraged.

Almost sick with anguish did poor Walter turn at such speeches; for more and more heavily the conviction pressed upon him, that he had in truth not one friend who could understand, and, understanding, aid him; he scarcely could define how, but still he felt that there had been others in the same position, and that they had found sympathizing friends, who brought them forward from obscurity, and enabled them to win, by the proper cultivation of their talents, a station for themselves.

Walter knew his own power; felt that, young as he was, his nature was higher than that of his fellows, his views more exalted; and it was difficult to him to believe that he stood so utterly alone that his talents were to remain disregarded and neglected. He had still the bitter lesson to learn, that unless their lot be among the independent and influential of the land, the gifted but too often stand alone, from the high aspirations feeding on themselves; the vain yearners for what this world may not give; for what is genius? A spark from that fountain of living light around the Eternal's throne—a link of that golden chain by which this world is suspended from its parent heaven, invisible to all save its possessors, sometimes not even to them, according as the immortal mind is dimmed by the shade of earth, or touched by the dazzling rays of heaven.

While his friends were actively endeavoring to procure him some advantageous situation, Walter learned that an apprentice was wanted by one of the most influential engravers of the metropolis. He sought the establishment directly, and was received politely, but coldly.

"Such a press of applicants there were," Mr. Markham said, "that really unless the candidates could bring credentials from experienced men in the art, it was almost impossible to give them the attention they might deserve."

"No such condition had been made in the advertisement," Walter said, and added, perhaps somewhat proudly, "that had he known such was needed, he would not have intruded. He thought ability the desired criterion."

"Ability! oh! of course, that would be proved by the necessary credentials. He would, however, be happy to

look over Mr. Leslie's portfolio; he supposed he knew something of the art, as he did not look so very young as to begin from the very beginning."

Walter answered with simplicity and truth; and modestly unclasping his portfolio, he placed it before Mr. Markham.

A very casual glance sufficed to convince the engraver that there was no ordinary genius impressed in those simple drawings; but he was too much a man of the world, and of worldly interests, to express admiration till he could feel his way.

"Very good, very good," he said. "If we can come to terms, why engraving may be no hard matter after all. I have had youngsters who did not give so much promise, and yet did well. You have friends, I suppose, willing to pay the necessary premium for the advantages which an apprenticeship in my *studio* offers?"

Walter felt the hot blood burn in his cheek, though he struggled against it calmly to say "that he was not so provided. He was the only son of a widowed mother, caring not how hard he labored, but the premium Mr. Markham demanded was certainly not in his power to give. He had hoped that his abilities, his love of the art——"

He stopped, for the countenance of his hearer became hard as iron—only varied by a slight kind of sneer. He closed the portfolio, and very politely said,

"The thing was impossible. He had only too many candidates offering yet more than he demanded: the difficulty, in fact, was whom to choose. He was sorry Mr. Leslie should have taken the trouble to call, as he believed the advertisement had particularly mentioned premium. He regretted being obliged to shorten their interview—but—a particular engagement—"

Walter bowed proudly and retired.

"Perhaps, after all, I have not the gift I dreamed I had," he said internally, as slowly he paced the crowded streets, alone amidst thousands. "Surely, had there been any promise of talent, he would have said so, though he could not serve me. I heard he was an artist himself, discerning and impartial. Perhaps it is better he did not. I may more easily reconcile myself to other employment."

But still, the wish once excited, that by engraving he might not entirely neglect the pencil, would not let him rest; and he sought the friend most sincerely interested in his welfare, to obtain his assistance in furthering the plan He found him, however, much averse to it.

"It was necessary," he said, "that Walter should obtain some situation which would pay directly. He had heard that a large establishment connected with the East India House was offering £50 per annum, with a promise of raising it gradually till it reached £200, to any one who knew something of the oriental languages, as well as those of Europe."

Knowing that Walter did this, his friend advised him to prove that his wish for employment was no idle profession by securing it directly. He argued so successfully that Walter sought the head of the establishment that very hour, gave such proof of his skill in languages and penmanship as caused the greatest satisfaction, and was engaged; the whole business irrevocably settled, ere he turned his weary footsteps home.

CHAPTER XIII.

ESTRANGEMENT AND NEGLECT.—WOODLANDS.—PARTING WORDS REMEMBERED.—FLORA.

It is strange and sad that any trial, instead of deadening our faculties, save to the one source of grief, so awakens every susceptibility to pain, and so opens the varied sluices of the human heart, that all its mysterious yearnings lie unsealed before us. In the calm and cheerful tenor of her previous life Florence had never felt lonely, though one by one the young companions of her youth faded from her path. Change in character or situation which time must produce had dissolved this intercourse unconsciously and without pain; but with Emily Melford the case was different. Florence never could forget those who had once been kind; and Emily had, through two years' regular and frequent correspondence,

so completely treated her as a confidential friend, that Florence could scarcely think of change in her, even while she had long felt that *her* simple pleasures or anxieties obtained no sympathy. Emily always wrote of herself, and Florence's self-love might have been flattered, as there is always something soothing to our *amour propre* in being the trusted repository of another person's secrets. The third year of their intercourse, however, Emily's letters came at longer and longer intervals, on smaller sized paper, and in wider lines, till at last they ceased altogether. Florence's last communication having been answered, after an interval of four months, by a few hurried and irrelevant lines, she could not write again; more particularly as this occurred just about the time of the offer of marriage to which we have before alluded. Thus, followed as it had been in two short months by Mr. Leslie's death, weeks passed and the intercourse was not renewed, and when Florence awoke from the first stupor of anguish, to outward and more trifling things, it was to the bitter consciousness of estrangemont and neglect.

Mr. Leslie's death had been in all the newspapers, and still with the clinging confidence of her nature, Florence believed that Emily would not, could not be so engrossed in self, as to permit such a bereavement to pass unnoticed. But she hoped in vain. She knew by the fashionable journals, that all the Melfords were in London. She was even foolish enough to hope that Emily was coming to speak her sympathy, and therefore would not write—but neither visit nor letter came.

With Lady Ida, Florence had never been a regular correspondent. Her shrinking sensitiveness always kept her back, fearful to intrude; feeling that a wider barrier stretched between her and Lady Ida when in joy, than when she had been in sorrow. She had written, indeed, whenever Lady Ida's own messages, Emily's offers of opportunities, and her own mood of hilarity, had given her courage to do so. But this was over now, for Emily Melford was the only one through whom she could hear of Lady Ida; and it seemed as if now, she dared not encourage those visions of Lady Ida's continued regard

in which she had indulged so long. Since her bereavement, all felt changed *around* and *within* her. She asked herself why such bitter thoughts should come, when surely she had enough of sorrow? But she could not answer, and her warm affections twined closer and closer round the beloved inmates of her home, seeking to banish her own sad thoughts in entire devotion to those around her.

As the growth of affection supposes the existence of good qualities, and from the regard of others permits us to form a higher estimate of ourselves, so the loss of it supposes a decay of those qualities; and lowering us in our self-esteem, it is long before the wounded spirit can throw aside the false idea and regain its former position. Oh! too sadly and closely is the happiness of man entwined with his fellow-man; or rather, too lightly is such truth considered. How much of misery might be soothed were sorrow cheered; were mutual kindness the grand object of life; were social benevolence to walk the earth, giving her blessed balm to those that weep, and her gladdening words to those that smile!

Perceiving that Florence, in spite of all her efforts, did not rally either in spirits or health, Mrs. Leslie at length prevailed on her to accept Mrs. Rivers' repeated invitations, and spend a short time at Woodlands. Florence consented with reluctance. Her mind was just at that time in a state of painful uncertainty; of earnest longings in thought, and a too sensitive fearfulness in performance. The love she bore her brother exceeded the mere affection of hand-in-hand companionship. His high feelings, his poet's soul, his precarious health, bound him to her with ties of tenderness and almost veneration, which year by year increased.

Lady Ida's parting words—"If in any thing you need me, or believe my friendship or influence can be of any service to you, write without scruple," returned to her memory repeatedly. Her influence or that of her husband might indeed be of unspeakable service to Walter, and might she indeed ask it for him?

At Woodlands these thoughts continued. It was not too late, for he was not bound to his present employment

for any determinate period. Had Lady Ida never been kind, almost a stranger, Florence could have appealed to her without any hesitation: but the dread of asking too much she knew not how to overcome. Walter's figure rose before her, paler, thinner than it had been, with that sad, but unspeakably beautiful expression which she had marked, when he told them a situation was obtained—and this nerved her to the task.

It was not an easy one, for she would not give vent to the gush of feeling which came over her; but simply and mournfully alluding to her father's death and the consequent change in Walter's prospects, made him, and him alone, the subject of her letter. She wrote with affectionate eloquence of his talents and peculiar character; and then alluding to Lady Ida's parting words, entreated that the friendship, the influence she had promised her, might be shown to her brother. Not one word in that eloquent letter was lowering to the writer, or derogatory to the true benevolence of the receiver. The spell once broken, Florence was true to herself and to her friend; and materially might that letter have altered Walter's prospects, had it been permitted to reach its destination. To account for its fate, we must go back a space.

We have before mentioned Mrs. Rivers and her establishment, and that with Flora Leslie, whose similarity of name proved afterwards a most annoying circumstance, Florence had no idea or feeling in common; nay, she had so penetrated her system of deceit with regard to her generous protectress, that though no look or word ever betrayed this to Mrs. Rivers herself, Flora's own suspicions were aroused, and envy, with its whole train of bad thoughts and actions, was excited towards her. A circumstance had also occurred which increased these feelings into active virulence. Mrs. Rivers herself lived very much retired, and nothing could ever prevail on her to join in society; but since Woodlands was in the vicinity of a large country town, where there was much public and private gayety, often enlivened by military officers, Flora Leslie was permitted to go out with one or another *chaperone* of Mrs Rivers' selection and approval.

How the young lady conducted herself in society,

therefore, Mrs. Rivers never knew, and any tale brought to her by others of her *protégée*, she made it a point to disbelieve, from her received faith in the world's proneness to injure and malign. It so happened that an affair more than usually scandalous became so notorious as not only to penetrate the walls of Woodlands, but the ears of its mistress, just at the time when Florence was staying with her, after her father's death, when she of course could not accompany Flora into visiting society, as she had sometimes done before.

Mrs. Rivers never made a confusion. She quietly inquired all that was necessary, and then charged the young lady with the fact. Her distrust of the world worked even here, and Flora's protestations and assurances of no intentional ill might have weighed against the voice of rumor, had she not unfortunately remembered that Florence had been sometimes Flora's companion in society, and appealed to her judgment for the truth or falsehood of the charge. Had she ever observed any thing in her former conduct to demand present belief?

Now it unfortunately happened that it was the very witnessing Flora's imprudent conduct, when not under Mrs. Rivers' eye, which had first awakened Florence to a true estimate of her character. A circumstance most degrading in its nature, too, had the year before come under her knowledge; and this appeal from Mrs. Rivers was, in consequence, peculiarly and painfully distressing. In vain she conjured Mrs. Rivers to ask her nothing; not to compel her to be that most hateful of all characters, a talebearer.

Mrs. Rivers, always obstinate, became more so, saying so much, and that so bitterly, that Florence at last believed the truth would do Flora less harm than the concealment. The consequence was that Mrs. Rivers believed *half* the reported tale, and so far restrained Flora as to declare that she should not go out again till people had forgotten her former conduct, and she knew how to behave properly.

In outward appearance, Flora was very humble and submissive; protesting that all Mrs. Rivers said was perfectly just, and that she bore no ill-will to Florence, for she knew she would not have said a word against her, unless compelled. Florence had no faith in Flora's pro-

fessions—they were not natural; still her own conscience so completely acquitted her of all intentional unkindness, that she never dreamed of enmity, and still less of any personal evil which might thence accrue. Perhaps she thought less of the circumstance because, just then, her mind was pre-occupied by her intended letter to Lady Ida. In former visits to Woodlands she had repeatedly spoken of this noble friend. Mrs. Rivers had listened mournfully to these artless effusions; still there was something in the simple trustfulness of Florence so beautiful, so refreshing, that she could not check it by allusions to its folly. At this visit, however, she noticed that Florence was greatly changed. Not having seen her for nearly a year, it was scarcely strange that the deeper thoughtfulness, the decreasing elasticity of joyousness, the calmer, sadder mood, should strike her more forcibly than it had done Mrs. Leslie. It chanced that Florence had been speaking of her brother—her anxious desire that he should obtain more congenial employment—and Mrs. Rivers took the opportunity to remark,

"I should think Lady Ida St. Maur might assist your wishes, through her husband's influence. Why not write to her?"

Florence answered she had serious intentions of doing so, and she was *very* glad Mrs. Rivers advised what her own inclination so earnestly prompted.

"Advise, my dear child; do not fancy I advise: I cannot do so, because I believe that, like all the rest of the world, Lady Ida proves that out of sight is out of mind. And Florence Leslie is now, to her, as if she had never been."

Florence made no answer.

"You do not think so. Pity the dream will not last.'

"Perhaps it continues, dear madam, because I do not expect too much. No one feels more than I do myself the distance between me and Lady Ida; that, according to the rules of the world, we can hardly ever mingle intimately again. And as for pushing myself forward, or murmuring that my lot is lowlier than hers, I trust I shall never be so tempted as to do."

"And yet you love her—waste your affections on one who, you own yourself, can give you so little in return. Are you not wilfully exposing yourself to pain?"

"No; for it is a pleasure to have one, like her, on whose high and beautiful character affection and fancy can both rest. I have seen enough of Lady Ida to respect her, felt enough of her kindness to remember her with gratitude. Every message I received from her tells me that she still retains affectionate interest in my welfare; and as I expect so little, until that expectation be utterly blighted, I will love her still."

Mrs. Rivers shaded her eyes with her hand, and did not answer for some minutes.

"And how long is it since you have heard of her?" at length she asked abruptly.

It was a difficult question to answer without alluding to her disappointment in Emily Melford, but she simply replied, "rather more than a year."

"And yet you have the courage to address her in Walter's behalf!"

"I have; for I am certain, if she cannot forward my wishes for my brother, she will write, if it be but to say how much she feels with me on—on—" her voice painfully quivered, "the loss of my dear father."

"And suppose that you receive no answer to your letter? Will you be unwise enough to think about her still?"

Florence was silent.

"My letter may never reach her, a thousand chances—" she faltered.

"My dear foolish child, if you send your letter by post, and know her proper direction, you have not the hairbreadth of a chance that it should not reach her Write to her as you propose; if she do any thing for your brother, you have my free permission to love, respect, and trust her as much as you please; but if no answer come trust my experience, bitter though it be, and be sure a year or two years is the longest term that the warmest friendship, the most affectionate interest ever lasted, and wonderful if it last so long."

She left the room as she spoke, and Florence let her

work fall from her lap, and clasping her hands, exclaimed—

"If I may not hope—may not trust—why should I write at all? why expose myself to the pain of feeling, that in one so good, so kind, I have in truth no interest now; but if indeed no answer come, surely I am too proud to care for those who never think of me"

But the expression of her countenance belied her words, and Flora Leslie could scarcely restrain the delight, the triumph of feeling that revenge the more violently desired, because so long restrained, was in her power, and cost what it might to compass, should be obtained

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LETTER ABSTRACTED AND ITS SUBSTITUTE.—FLORA AGAIN.

One of Mrs. Rivers' numerous particularities was excessive care, with regard to the sending and receiving letters, always dispatching her confidential steward to receive them from, and take them to, the office, which was in Winchester. The key of the letter-bag was kept in the steward's room, and of her letter's fate in England Florence felt secure, nor could she doubt that it would reach its destination.

Little could her pure mind imagine the extent of meanness to which hatred and revenge could lead her companion; and still less could Mrs. Rivers believe that all her precautions with regard to the security of letters should be frustrated by the machinations of a girl. The key was removed at dead of night from the steward's room, the bag unclosed, the letter abstracted, the key returned to its place, and, in less than ten minutes, Flora Leslie was again seated in her own apartment, unsuspected and unheard. Her step was too light, her measures too artful for discovery; and she sat beside the hearth, whose embers were still burning, scarcely able to believe that

the act of villany, which had caused her so many sleepless nights to plan, had been so easily accomplished.

For a moment she hesitated whether to read before she burned; but it was only for a moment. She tore open the letter, and revelled as she read, for every line breathed that simple trusting affection, that respectful deference, which, if unanswered, would be so deeply wounding.

With all the feelings of gratified revenge Flora sat looking on the letter, when she was startled by a sudden thought. The steward would have to give Mrs. Rivers an account of the postage which he would have to pay upon this foreign letter, and Florence's great anxiety would, of course make her inquisitive into this matter. What was to be done? a very few minutes' thought sufficed; for the wicked are only too quick at expedients.

To please Mrs. Rivers, Florence had once consented to take some lessons with Flora of one of those professors of penmanship taught in six lessons; and, in consequence, their hand-writing became so exactly similar, that with scarcely any effort each could so imitate the writing of the other, as to render the distinguishing them almost impossible. It was a dangerous weapon for one like Flora, and little did Florence imagine that what she had done for mere amusement was sedulously cultivated by her companion. She had, in fact, already used it, in order that a correspondence with a handsome young ensign in the town, carried on through a convenient female friend, might never be traced so exactly to her as to become inconvenient or disagreeable; particularly as she had taken the liberty of substituting the name of Florence instead of Flora Leslie, by way of signature; silencing the "still small voice of conscience," by pretending that the great similarity of names removed all idea of dishonor: for all she knew, she might have been christened Florence, and called Flora, as many others were—she certainly did no harm, to adopt the prettier cognomen; how many girls engaged in a love correspondence adopted other names than their own!

This power, of course, presented an expedient in her present dilemma. With some difficulty she concocted a few lines, for to make *composition* appear like her com-

panion's was infinitely more difficult than to imitate her writing; but to send merely a blank sheet might, she thought, excite inquiries, and bring all to light too soon. A brief epistle was at length written, alluding neither to Walter nor Mr. Leslie's death, but breathing a degree of levity and frivolity wholly unlike Florence at any time, even in her gayest moods—and wanting, besides, that genuine heartfelt respect which had ever pervaded her most careless effusions.

That Lady Ida should ever demand the meaning of this unusual letter was too simple and straightforward a method of proceeding for Flora's crooked comprehension; she hoped and believed it would so offend, that Lady Ida would never again seek her; answer by letter, of course she would not, and Florence would, in consequence, suffer as much as her revengeful wishes could desire. Carefully written on foreign paper, folded, sealed, and directed so like the real one, that Florence herself would have hesitited which to call her own, Flora again stealthily made her way to the letter-bag, put the letter into it, and returned undiscovered to her own quarters; then, deliberately tearing Florence's letter into pieces, she committed each separately to the flames, watching them burn till not a vestige remained; then, carefully collecting the smouldering ashes, she flung them anew on the fire, that no sign of paper might be found amongst the cinders the following morning. This accomplished, she threw herself on her bed, whether to sleep or not we leave more imaginative persons to determine.

"You are sure, quite sure, Watson, the letter to Lady Ida St. Maur was safely deposited in the post?" Florence eagerly asked the steward, the moment of his return; and satisfied by his exact description of the letter which she had purposely refrained from showing him, and of the sum paid for its postage, she rested secure and happy.

A month, nay, perhaps two, might elapse before she could receive an answer; but the letter was no sooner thought to be safely gone, than hope began her work; and though Florence thought she did not hope at all, her spirits unconsciously grew light, and the smile more often circled her lip. She determined to say nothing of having

written either to her mother, Walter, or e n Minie, in order that the pleasure of reading them La.y Ida's letter might be the greater.

Before the visit of Woodlands was over, however, her thoughts were turned from her brother's interests into a more painful channel. The last blow on Mrs. Rivers' in reality too susceptible heart, was struck, as Florence had long predicted, by the orphan whom she had adopted, treated, loved, and confided in, as her own child. Flora Leslie eloped from Woodlands, not with the ensign before alluded to, but with a gallant major, who had been persuaded into the belief that all Mrs. Rivers' large property was so settled on Flora that it could not be willed away; and that Flora, instead of being a portionless orphan, was literally the rightful heiress; though Mrs. Rivers had artfully chosen to hush up that matter, and *act* benevolence when she was only doing justice.

Thinking his charming Flora marvellously ill-used, and that her supposed fortune would be peculiarly acceptable, the major made such good use of his time as completely to exclude from her fickle imagination all recollection of the despairing ensign, whom, however, as we have seen, under a feigned hand-writing and a feigned name, she still continued to encourage. His departure to join his regiment at Malta, a fortnight previously, bearing Flora's precious letters with him, and writing her a most lachrymose farewell, was particularly agreeable to the heartless coquette, who just then wished him out of her way—the major offering more substantial attractions in a handsomer face, a more distinguished manner, a supposed fortune, and higher rank. The well-matched pair, in consequence, departed one fine morning in a coach and four to Gretna, where, it may be as well to state, the nuptial knot was indissolubly tied.

The major, however, stormed himself hoarse when he discovered that his fair Flora was no heiress, but recovered a degree of serenity when a deed of gift came most unexpectedly from Mrs. Rivers, securing to his wife a life annuity of a hundred pounds. That this gift was acccompanied by a few stern lines, impossible to be misunderstood, importing that it was the last communication between

Mrs. Rivers and her ungrateful *protégée*, who would be henceforth blotted from her recollection, concerned not the gallant major and his amiable bride one tittle, both choosing to believe, from this unexpected generosity, that Mrs. Rivers would still leave all her property to Flora, simply because there seemed no one else to whom it could possibly be left.

To account for Major Hardwicke's preferring the *éclat* of an elopement to honorable proposals, and a public engagement, be it known that he had asked Mrs. Rivers, in all due form, for permission to address Miss Leslie, but had been peremptorily refused, on plea of his private character not being such as to obtain him the hand of any respectable young woman.

The rigidity of feature, the absence of all visible emotion, with which Mrs. Rivers received the tidings of Flora's flight absolutely terrified Florence; for she felt convinced it was no indifference which caused it; yet how to soothe she knew not, for how could she speak consolation where none was demanded? She was treated as usual; the whole establishment went on as if nothing had occurred worthy to disturb them; but not ten days after the elopement Mrs. Rivers was seized by a serious illness, which hung over her for weeks, during the whole of which time Florence tended her as a daughter, with a sweetness of temper, a silent tenderness, which—though at the time to all appearance scarcely felt—was remembered and acted upon years afterwards.

Not a word was breathed as to what might have been the cause of that illness, either by the sufferer herself or any of those around her; but when she recovered, she formed the extraordinary resolution of leaving her estate of Woodlands, with all its adjoining houses and lands, under charge of her steward till they could be advantageously let, and retiring she did not say where, and no one had courage to ask. There was no persuading her to forego this resolution, no arguing against it, for she gave not the slightest clue to any plan, except that of leaving Woodlands. She parted with Florence, kindly as her stern nature would permit, and placed a pocket-book containing two fifty pound bank-notes in her hand. From

that hour Florence Leslie heard no more of Mrs. Rivers, knew nothing of her place of residence, her mode of living, possessed not a clue even to her existence till two years afterwards, when she was strangely and most unexpectedly recalled.

CHAPTER XV.

SUSPENSE.—BROTHER AND SISTER.—CONFIDENCE.

THE illness of Mrs. Rivers had so unavoidably lengthened Florence Leslie's stay at Woodlands, that the two months, to which she had confidently looked, as bringing an answer to her letter, had nearly elapsed. During her absence Mrs. Leslie had removed to a neat little dwelling in the neighborhood of Camberwell; a convenient distance for Walter's daily visits to the metropolis, and giving him fresher air and greater quietness on his return.

Florence rejoiced in her change of residence. Her visit at Woodlands had been one of anxiety and care. She felt for Mrs. Rivers infinitely more than that lady seemed to feel for herself. Those highflown notions of human nature, which in former days Emily Melford used to smile at and Lady Ida to love, she still retained, and all that occurred to shake her belief in human goodness painfully depressed her. Gladly then she exchanged the cold solitary splendor of Woodlands for her mother's humble dwelling. Here there were not so many objects to recall her departed parent as in their former residence. He did not haunt each room, each nook, till he seemed almost palpably before them.

Grief itself was calmed. They could bear to think and speak of him, as one "not lost, but gone before." They had not sought to banish sorrow, to stifle its sad yet wholesome voice by seeking this world's pleasures, for they looked on affliction as the voice of their heavenly Father calling them still more closely to himself. The tranquil routine of domestic duties and enjoyments was again their own; and but for one engrossing care, Florence

might even have been happy. But how could this be, when days, weeks, far more than the necessary period rolled on, and still no answer to her letter came; no line to say that Lady Ida was unchanged, and could feel for Florence still? Her simple confidence had almost led her to believe the answer would be waiting for her at home. Then she sought to console herself that she had miscalculated the time; but when more than three months had passed, even this consolation could no longer avail her; and still each day, each hour found poor Florence in all the bitter heart-sickness of hope deferred.

Of all human trials, not the least is the anxiously expecting a letter from a beloved friend, involving matters of greater moment than mere personal gratification. The first thought in the morning, the sudden upspringing of hope, that ere the night cometh suspense will be at an end; the bounding of the heart, the flushing of the cheek at every step and knock, when it nears the postman's hour—becoming more and more intense at the sight of a letter; and then the revulsion of blood, the sudden pause of every pulse, when all is past, and it is not the letter we expect—*that* is still to come, and all which we have borne, even to the rush of hope, the sickness of disappointment, must be endured again. And then the heavy sinking of the soul, the pressure of tears upon the heart and in the eye, though, perhaps, none falls, when night with her silence and deep shadows and still solitude, comes to tell us another day is gone, and the morning's dream is vain.

And all this Florence had to bear in silence and alone, for she had kept her resolution, and told none that she had written; she rejoiced that she had not, for to have listened to reproach cast upon one still so dearly loved, would but have increased her burden. She still heard Minie, often her mother, allude to Lady Ida in terms of fond remembrance, and compelled herself to echo Minie's artless and oft-repeated wish, that she were again in England, to be as kind to Florence as she had been before, even while her own heart felt breaking beneath the thought, that to her Lady Ida was as nothing now; and that her return to England could bring but increase of pain.

But it was not the mere suffering of disappointed friendship. She could bear her own sorrow; but her Walter, her idolized brother. In vain she tried to persuade herself that even had she heard from Lady Ida, her brother's interests might not have been served. She could not believe Sir Edmnund's power was so limited, and each week, each month which passed, leaving yet deeper hectic or more livid paleness on Walter's check—more fragile beauty on his slight form—increased the sufferings she endured.

It was strange that these various signs of waning health, so noticed by her, should pass unseen by their ever fond and anxious mother. Yet so it was. Mrs. Leslie *was* deceived. Walter's unwavering cheerfulness in his mother's presence, the ardor with which, after eight or nine hours passed mechanically at the desk, he devoted himself to his favorite studies, coining mental gold from every moment, seemed to satisfy and re-assure her. When wearied with his daily toil, the hours passed in study ap peared so to revive him, that all weariness vanished before he retired to rest; animation glowed on his cheek and sparkled in his eye, strength seemed to brace his limbs, and his voice grew almost joyous The deceptive dream was strengthened by the fact that Mrs. Leslie saw her son but a few minutes in her bed-room before he went out in the morning. Florence gave him his early breakfast. Florence it was who noticed the excessive languor, the deadly paleness, sometimes even the dewy moisture on his brow when he would descend from his own room, as if sleep, instead of refreshing and strengthening, had weak ened him well nigh to exhaustion; and at times, so subduing was the accompanying depression, that his struggles to smile away his sister's anxious looks would end in stifled hysteric sobs. But yet, when they met again at dinner, there was no trace of this; his smile, his caresses greeted his fond mother as was their wont, and night brought anew its excitement and its joy.

The bedrooms of the brother and sister were separated by a thin partition, one of whose small square panels slipped up and down, forming a loop-hole of verbal commu-

nication between the rooms which were on the upper floor entirely by themselves.

It was a warm night in May, and Florence, after struggling with the sad thoughts which would intrude when she was alone (for though six months had elapsed since she had written, there still were times when she almost seemed to hope) had succeeded by full an hour's serious reading, in obtaining a partial calm. She was roused by hearing the chimes of an adjoining church tell half an hour after midnight, and startled at finding it so late, she hastily rose to prepare for bed. Glancing towards the panel, she saw it had, as often happened, slid down of itself, and she approached to close it softly, imagining her brother slept. One glance undeceived her. Through the light drapery of the bed, she saw him bending over a small table, evidently engaged in writing. She watched the rapid movement of his hand; fast, faster yet, as if it strove to keep pace with the rush of thoughts within, until at length he raised his head; and oh, what a glow of beauty that countenance disclosed! He passed his hand feebly across his brow, and then again bent over the paper. Physical power had departed, and the flush was succeeded by a paleness as of death. Florence flew to his side. she threw her arms around his neck, her tears of sympathy falling on his cheek.

Walter started as if found in guilt; but then, as if he could not meet her half reproachful, half sorrowful glance, he passionately exclaimed—

"Florence, my own Florence! do not reproach me, do not tell me that I should not do this, that I am wasting the life pledged to be devoted to you all—tell me not this, I cannot bear it now."

"I will not, Walter; only trust me, as one who can feel with you and for you, in every pang and every thought; yes, even to the deep, but, oh! how dangerous, joys of these midnight watchings! Would that I could aid you as I love! You would have no sorrow then."

She folded closely and still more fondly to him; and long and mournfully interesting was the conversation which ensued. Never were two hearts more capable of under-

standing each other; and Walter's overcharged mind felt inexpressibly relieved, as he poured forth the whole torrent of thought and feeling into her sympathizing ear. Yet there was no complaint, no murmur that his lot in life was cast so differently for him from that he would have cast for himself. But to check the torrent of poetry within him was impossible. He had tried to refrain entirely from the use of either pen or pencil, thinking such neglect the best method of reconciling himself to his more distasteful duties; but the morbid state into which he sank soon proved the fallacy of the attempt, and he resumed them. Elasticity and happiness appeared in consequence to return, and he could not believe that his health was suffering, for at least he now slept calmly; when before he had passed night after night in feverish wakefulness, or in such sleep that it was worse than waking.

"They think me a poor spirited romantic fool," he added, "because I cannot join in the sole ambition which seems to engross my companions. Oh, Florence, you know not how I hate that word gold! How I sicken at the constant thought of interest—wealth—its omnipotence! as if neither virtue, nor goodness, nor beauty could exist without it. If I could but associate with higher and nobler minds, the drudgery of a distasteful employment could be borne."

"But why heed the mere expression of worldliness, my Walter? Have you not that within you raising you far above such petty minds?"

"No, Florence, no! the gift of poetry was never yet sufficient so to elevate the poet as to render him invulnerable to the bitter shafts of more worldly natures. He must be appreciated by the gifted and the good, or he can have no security, no confidence in his own powers. He dares not dream of genius till it is pronounced his own. He dares not believe that his mind may produce immortal fruit, till world has said it: and therefore he is so exposed to those petty trials which fret and vex the spirit far more than one weighty blow."

"But influence may become your own, dearest Walter. We cannot know for certain that this lawsuit will really be decided against us, and if gained——"

"Florence, I DARE not think of it. God knows, I value not fortune nor station for aught but the good it might bestow on others—that having gold, I might not *think* about it. That I might associate with those who, not having to seek it, might surely afford to devote their mental energies to some nobler object. Italy, too, floats before me in the sweet dream of independence—Italy, with its beautiful nature, its glorious art; and I have pictured our wandering there, you, dearest Florence, to satisfy your early longing, I, to study in those galleries so full of genius—study, venerate, and, at a respectful distance, follow. I might, indeed, become an artist then. Painting and Poetry should go hand in hand; and then—then—but, oh, how dare I think of these things, when all may be a blank!"

And, as Florence looked on the flushed cheek and kindling eye, on the lip parched and dry with extreme excitement, she felt, indeed, that such dreams were better banished. Walter thought that they were, but was it natural that they should be? Florence knew too well the silent sway of hope. A clock striking two roused them from the brief pause which had followed Walter's last words, and clasping his arms round her, he bade her "go to bed, and God bless her!" he had robbed her of her best sleep, but she knew not the comfort that hour had been to him.

"You would tell me something more, dearest Walter? Do not hesitate: I am not in the least sleepy. Why will you not speak?"

"Because my question is such an idle one. When do Sir Edmund and Lady Ida return to England?"

He felt his sister's hand tremble in his own, and to his astonishment, he saw her cheek pale, and her lip so quiver, that for a minute she could not answer.

"I cannot tell you, Walter; you know Emily Melford has long since given up my correspondence, and I only heard regularly of Lady Ida through her."

"Ah, true; but you have written sometimes. Have you since——my poor father——," he stopped.

"Once," she replied hurriedly, and almost inarticulately; "but why do you ask?"

"I will tell you, dearest; but do not laugh at me; I have fancied, foolishly perhaps, that years of absence would make no difference in Lady Ida, and that through your friendship I might become acquainted with her husband; and all I hear of him, all the world speaks of him, distinguishes him for talent, genius, and yet more for benevolence. Oh, Florence, what might not such a friend be to me! My own dear sister, what have I said?"

Vainly the poor girl struggled to suppress, or at least conceal her emotion. She felt as if the whole extent of bitterness and disappointment had not been felt till that moment, and her head sank on her brother's shoulder, with a burst of uncontrolled tears.

Had Walter been a philosopher, he would have endeavored to conquer her grief by sage reasoning. He was a poet, and, in consequence, owned the potency of the law of FEELING over and above that of REASON. And so he simply drew her closely to him, kissing away the burning tears, and whispering words of such earnest tenderness that they only flowed the faster.

"My poor Florence! Bless you for thus thinking, thus writing for me. Had your affectionate eloquence been successful, I could not have felt it more. Do not weep thus. There may be some mistake, some extraordinary chance acting against us, which will all be made clear in time. I will not believe that Lady Ida is so changed. It is impossible! trust me, she will give you cause to love her more fondly yet. Now go to rest, my own sweet sister. We shall both be happier for this night's pain, for we need no longer weep or smile alone."

And he was right. They *were* happier. A new spirit pervaded Walter's duties and pursuits. A poet to be happy must have sympathy, intelligence, enthusiasm, which will reflect back, and encourage his own; and in Florence, Walter realized all these things. Her exquisite taste, her intuitive perception of the true and beautiful, allowed him to confide in her judgment, to improve from her suggestions; and to her inexpressible happiness, she found that from that night he was more like himself. For her own feelings, they were strangely soothed by that involuntary confidence; conquered, indeed, they were not,

for she could not share Walter's belief. From change or unkindness in Lady Ida, she turned sorrowingly away as impossible; but she thought circumstances, difference of station, raised, and must forever raise, an insuperable barrier between them.

CHAPTER XVI.

TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD.

Some three months after the conclusion of our last chapter, and consequently nearly nine from the affairs narrated at Woodlands, two ladies were seated together in the balcony of a most beautiful villa in the environs of Rome. It was Lady St. Maur, and her mother-in-law, Lady Helen. Time had made little difference in the former; the girl had, in truth, merged into the woman; the flower was beautiful as the bud had promised. The balcony where they sat led by a flight of steps, ornamented by a light arabesque balustrade to the garden, whose innumerable flowers sent forth such luscious scents as to perfume the air, almost overpoweringly, in the still calm of evening. Rome on her seven hills lay on their left, absolutely imbedded in a glow of crimson light; her remains of antiquity, her walls and towers, the crumbling, but eloquent shadows of the past, were softened into such increase of beauty, that one might almost fancy the seat of ancient empire restored to what it had been. Around, below, and above them, were vineyards, with their twining leaves and blushing fruit, interspersed with all that luxuriance of foliage, richness of scenery, clearness of atmosphere, and gorgeousness of sky, so peculiar to Italy. Nature never loses by constant and intimate association; the more we love her, the more she repays that love—the more we acknowledge her power, the more thrillingly and deliciously she infuses herself into our very being, giving us a buoyancy of spirit that, however restrained and hidden, will never entirely depart, but burst afresh into life

and joy with the very next view, and consciousness of that Divinity from whom it sprang.

Books and work, the pen and pencil, were the usual employments of the female inmates of that peaceful spot; but, this evening, their conversation had turned on the strange chances of life and death which had just given to Sir Edmund St. Maur that barony which, when Lady Ida Villiers married him, it had seemed impossible that he should have so lived so long as to obtain. The last of the title, a warm friend and admirer of Sir Edmund, had left him sole guardian of his only child, a daughter, then under the care of relatives in England, with the earnest request that if they ever returned to live in their native land, Lady Ida would herself superintend her education, and introduce her under no auspices but her own—a request unhesitatingly granted by his friend. Their conversation was interrupted by visitors, amongst whom was a lady lately arrived from England, who, in course of conversation on that country, chanced to remark that she had known little of London topics of interest, having resided some few months before leaving England in the neighborhood of Winchester, with an invalid friend.

"Winchester!" Lady St. Maur repeated with interest; and after a moment's hesitation she asked if Lady Blandford chanced to know Woodlands and its inmates—if she had ever met with a Miss Leslie, sometimes staying with Mrs. Rivers. The lady looked astonished at the last question—forgetting to answer the first, in her surprise that such a person as report had pictured Miss Leslie, could in any way interest Lady St. Maur—briefly alluding to the circumstances which, as we already know, had transpired to the discredit of Flora Leslie, adding, that she understood an elopement had concluded the affair—the more scandalous, as the young lady had not two months before lost her father.

Now, it so happened, that Lady St. Maur, equally with her visitor, knew nothing of the existence of *two* Miss Leslies, bearing the same, or nearly the same, Christian name. In Florence's early communications with her friend, she had often mentioned Mrs. Rivers and her beautiful estate; but from the total want of sympathy with, and

entire disapproval of Flora's character, had never mentioned her. Therefore that Lady Blandford could allude to any one but Florence was not likely, more especially as she mentioned her father's death, which Lady St. Maur had seen in the newspapers about that time; although, from no allusion being made to it in the last letter she had received from Florence, she had hoped it was not true. This last letter, we need scarcely state, was the false one substituted by Flora, instead of that which had caused Florence so much pain to write. Its strange and frivolous style had annoyed and perplexed Lady St. Maur, who, notwithstanding her many new ties and enjoyments, and the various claims on her time and affection from friends of her own rank in England, yet retained an affectionate interest in the young girl who had so loved her. She had often taxed Emily Melford, during the last year, with never alluding to Florence—asking questions concerning her, which Emily either left unanswered, or by acknowledging that she ever heard from her now, contrived to leave the impression that Florence had ceased to care for the correspondence, and so it had been broken off.

Knowing the indolent and capricious character of her cousin, Lady St. Maur had, however, always thought her the more to blame, until she received this incomprehensible letter; when the thought would enter her mind that Florence must be very greatly changed. She compared the letter with the last she had had from her nearly a year previous. The writing, the signature were so exactly similar that it seemed not possible it could have been written by any other person—which fancy wild as she felt it was, Lady St. Maur had entertained. Her husband had glanced over it, merely remarking, if Miss Leslie could not write more respectfully, she had better not write at all, and had thought no more about it, till the subject was somewhat painfully recalled. Lady St. Maur, however, could not dismiss it so easily. About a month before she had thus heard (as she supposed) from Florence—she herself had written to her feelingly and affectionately, sympathizing with her on her father's death—this letter she sent to Emily Melford, requesting her to direct it properly, and forward it. Florence's non-allusion

to it, excited the belief that she had not yet received it; and that when she did, even if its condolence were not necessary, yet still that she would write again, and more like herself. Months, however, passed, and she received no reply, and therefore Lady Blandford's communication but too painfully recalled the supposition that Florence was not only changed, but was, in fact, no longer worthy of her remembrance or regard. Yet, when she recalled the beautiful promise which her youth had given, how could this be? What circumstances, what temptations could have had such power? And such distressed perplexity did her countenance express, that when her husband joined her he noticed it, and tenderly inquired the reason. The expression with which he listened startled her. "You have heard something before to this effect, Edmund," she exclaimed, "and you have not told me, fearing to wound me. What is it? I would much rather know the truth."

His tale was soon told. While at Malta, where he had been several weeks on some political duty, he became intimate with several of the officers, and had been prevailed upon one day to join them at dinner in their mess-room. There had been lately a new arrival of troops from England, the officers of which, fresh from the gayeties of a large county town—which proved to be Winchester—became rather more communicative as the wine circled briskly round, than under other circumstances they might themselves have wished. The conversation soon became riotous, and loud and foremost amongst all other names, as the *belle* and the coquette of the season, Lord St. Maur had heard the name of a Flora or Florence Leslie. Startled and annoyed, for never hearing that name, save from the lips of his wife, it seemed to have imbibed a portion of her own purity and excellence. He listened still more attentively: he heard them mention Woodlands, and its misanthropic mistress, Mrs. Rivers, and felt convinced it must be the same, Florence's last letter to his wife flashing on his memory as still stronger confirmation. He heard her name bandied from lip to lip, sometimes contemptuously, sometimes admiringly, but always most disreputably to its object. One young

man—Ensign Camden—swore to her constancy, and challenged any one who dared deny that he was her preferred lover, offering to bring written proofs in the last letter he had received from her before he had quitted England; and drawing it from his pocket as he spoke, it was seized upon, with a burst of uproarious laughter, and in mock heroic tones read aloud for the benefit of the whole company. Lord St. Maur had been near enough to notice both the hand-writing and the signature, and had unhesitatingly recognised both. Camden, indignant at this publicity of what he vowed was a treasure too precious for any gaze but his own, had become more and more enraged, drawing his sword at length upon all who ventured to approach him, till he was dragged off to his quarters; and Lord St. Maur, in utter disgust at the scene, at length effected a retreat, not, however, before he heard many voices declare, that love-letters from Miss Leslie were no proof of preference, as every unmarried, good-looking officer of Winchester had, at one time or other, received them.

Lord St. Maur had purposely refrained from telling this to his wife, waiting till she might hear again from Florence, and thus clear up what certainly appeared a mystery. He found it difficult to believe that any person who could act thus could ever have been sufficiently worthy as to attract, and indeed rivet, Lady Ida's notice. But when time passed, and still no letter came, it argued unfavorably, and Lady Blandford's information, to Lord St. Maur's mind, so removed all remaining doubt, that he entreated his wife to banish Florence from her recollection, as wholly unworthy of her continued regard. But this was impossible. Instead of convincing her of Florence's utter unworthiness, Lady St. Maur's previous supposition returned, that some mysterious agency was at work, and that the strange letter she had received was not from the Florence she had loved, and that it was *not* to her these disgraceful rumors alluded. That there should indeed exist two persons of exactly the same name, whose hand-writing was so similar, did appear unlikely, but yet not so impossible as such a total change in Florence. She did not speak much on the subject, because she saw that

neither her husband nor Lady Helen could feel with her, nor was it likely, as they had never known Florence, that they should; but her active mind could not rest satisfied without making one effort to clear up the mystery. She knew it was useless to write to Emily Melford, whose representations that it was Florence's fault which had occasioned the cessation of their intercourse now involuntarily returned as proofs strong in confirmation of the reports against her. She therefore wrote to Lady Mary Villiers, requesting her to make every inquiry concerning Florence Leslie, purposely avoiding all allusion to these reports. Anxiously she waited the reply; but when it came, it told nothing she wished to hear. Lady Mary, through her father's confidential steward, had made every inquiry concerning the Leslies in very many quarters of London without any success. The house which they had formerly occupied in Bernard-street was in the hands of strangers—the very landlord changed; her brother himself had undertaken the inquiries at Winchester, but there the result had been more confused and unsatisfactory still; so much so, indeed, that she hardly liked to write it, for how even to make it intelligible in a brief detail she scarcely knew.

It appeared that a Miss Leslie, whose Christian name was Florence, or Flora, rumor could not agree which, was constantly residing with Mrs. Rivers at Woodlands; some said she was an orphan, others that her parents were both living in London, that she had made herself notorious at Winchester by the grossest impropriety of conduct, causing at length Mrs. Rivers to restrain her to Woodlands, but while there she still continued her intrigues So far all the rumors agreed, but after that they differed, some declaring an elopement had actually taken place, and the young lady was united to a gallant Major Hardwicke, and resided with him on the Continent; others, allowing the truth of the elopement, averred that Mrs. Rivers' steward had pursued and overtaken the fugitives before the completion of the ceremony, and conveyed Miss Leslie back to Woodlands, whence she was speedily sent under strict ward to her widowed mother.

The only positive facts then were these, that Mrs. Rivers

had quitted Woodlands, which was now occupied by strangers, and that Miss Leslie had never appeared at Winchester again.

"What they mean, or to whom they relate, I leave you to determine, my dear Ida," wrote Lady Mary in conclusion, "but if to the Florence Leslie of your creation, we must never speak of reading character again. I should fear, as you have not heard from her so long, it is *shame*, not *pride*, which keeps her silent. Fortunately, you have too many nearer and dearer ties for this to affect you much, but it is very disagreeable; it lowers our opinion of human nature, and creates a doubt even of the fairest promise; and worse still, it gives such a triumph to worldly, unromantic people."

So wrote Lady Mary, and confused and contradictory as the reports still were, yet there was no mention, no hint as to there being two Miss Leslies. Ida had not asked the question, imagining Lady Mary's reply would make it evident. Our readers know enough of the truth to remove at a glance all that was false; but, unfortunately, Lord St. Maur's family could not do so, therefore decided as presumptive evidence warranted.

The subject was never resumed; Florence Leslie's name never mentioned. Lady St. Maur could not defend and believe as her own heart still prompted, for she had no contrary proof to bring forward. "Oh! that Florence would but write again," she felt continually, "and thus disprove the scandal, or enable her to ask its explanation." But Florence did not write, neither then, nor during the whole period of Lord St. Maur's residence abroad. What effect all this had on Lady St. Maur, and its consequences to Florence, we shall discover in a future page.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CLOUD BURSTS.

THE blow, which Mrs. Leslie had long expected, at length fell. The suit was decided against them; and so heavily had the attendant expenses accumulated, that all

the little fortune of Walter and Florence was sacrificed to defray them; including also the £100 which Mrs. Rivers had bestowed, and which Florence secretly reserved, in case of such emergency.

Painful was the emotion of Mrs. Leslie, when on closely questioning her son as to the debts accumulated and means of payment, the whole truth was discovered.

"My children! my beloved children! Why have you done this?" was all that, for the first moment, she could exclaim. "Florence! Walter! both so little fitted to struggle with penury and labor. Indeed, indeed, it must not be!"

"Indeed, it must be, mother;" and Florence, kneeling by her mother's couch, covered her hand with kisses, while Walter continued—

"Unfitted for labor! Mother, do not wrong us thus. We shall do well enough, for we have still affection; nor shall we be grieved by seeing you in want of those little luxuries which, purchased by our labor, I know you would refuse. For myself, happily, I have no pursuit to seek; every year increases my salary—and there may come a day, dearest mother, when I may give you a more luxurious home; and Florence, our own Florence, need not work."

"Walter!" murmured his mother, grasping his hand as he bent over her. "Do not speak of another home; I need no other, with my children around me. But Florence, my sweet Florence, *must* she leave me? Is there no privation we may welcome, no comfort we may resign, to save her this?"

"We shall not be far severed, dearest mother," answered Florence, making a strong effort to subdue the choking sob. "A trifling pittance will content me; and if one of us must leave you—better, far better, I than Minie."

"And why, Florie dear? I do not see that at all. Nay, I am much better fitted to work amongst strangers than you are; for I do not feel little things half so much. So you take the portion you have so generously laid aside for me, and I will take your place, and go teach." And Minie Leslie, springing into the midst of the circle, with

her bright, beautiful face, and silvery laugh, seemed indeed a very spirit of joy, sent to breathe hope and comfort in the midst of gloom.

"*You* leave the shelter, the safety of home, and my mother's fostering care, to struggle with the world!" exclaimed Florence. "No; had we nothing to depend on but my own exertions, this should not be."

"Why, Florence, do you think I cannot gain my own living, as well as yourself? Mamma, did you ever hear her so conceited before?"

"Alas! my child; how few years more of experience, have awakened her to many, many thoughts of danger and temptation, of which your guileless innocence cannot know."

"Danger? temptation? dearest mother, why should they assail me more than Florence? Why should so much evil occur to me and none to her? Do not imagine that I wish to leave home—but if one of us *must* go, I should like to know what your wisdom, Master Walter, can bring forward against my plan; when you, of all persons, ought to know that when Florence weeps at unkindness or neglect, I laugh, and so am likely to be very happy when she would be very miserable. Come, sir, speak; what can you bring forward in objection?" she continued laying both hands caressingly on his arm, and looking up in his face so archly, that she seemed more than usually lovely.

Inexpressibly affected, Walter led her forward to a mirror hanging at the opposite end of the room and answered—

"Minie! you ask me what I can bring forward; look at your own sweet face, my darling sister, and you have my answer. You do not know its power; you have no wish, no temptation, to use that precious gift, save to add to the happiness of home. There have been none to tell you you are beautiful, save the lips of that faithful love, which while it speaks of beauty, bids you know its only value. But, thrown amidst heartless strangers, brought forward by your own exceeding loveliness, with none to guard and warn—doubly endangered by that very ignorance of all

worldly ways, which we so dearly love—Minie ! my precious Minie ! I would rather earn my bread, a slave behind a counter, than you should leave my mother !" And overcome by strong emotion, Walter Leslie clasped his young sister closer to him, while his voice shook, and his whole frame trembled ; Minie's joyous laugh was checked, and for several minutes she clung to him in tearful silence.

" But am I then to see you and Florence labor in sorrow and care, day after day, and I am to rest in idleness, simply because they say that I am beautiful ? Oh, Walter ! do not make me such a selfish wretch," she said at length, as she raised her head from his bosom, and flung back impetuously her beautiful hair ; " Am I sent into this world to do nothing, where all our exertions are needed, when God has given me a temper enabled to bear all things, and health sufficient for any labor ? And all this to be a useless burden on you both. Why am I not like others ? Why too beautiful for use ?"

" To be to us all we need—to give my mother joy when she would grieve," answered Florence, passionately. " Do not say those precious gifts are lent but to make you a useless burden. Oh, Minie ! you do not know what you are to us—how fondly we shall turn to the home which you so bless—how much more sad, more desolate, would be our mother's hearth, if you were absent."

" Florence, my child ! my blessed child ! do not speak thus," entreated Mrs. Leslie, an expression of agony contracting her features, which her children could not define ; " both so inexpressibly dear, why should the absence of one be felt more than that of the other ? Why, why should I consent to send you from me, and retain Minie by me ? Why expose you to danger, trial, and suffering, from which I would selfishly shelter her ? Florence ! Walter ! You know not, you cannot know, the agony of this decision."

" And, therefore, we will not let you decide, my beloved mother," replied Walter ; " leave it to your children—trust them in this emergency. While such love exists between us, wherever we are, whatever called upon to do, our paths can never be wholly sad. Trust us, oh ! trust us, mother,

and while we may see the smile on your dear lips—the peace of God on your fond heart—we must, we shall, be blessed."

For a few minutes Mrs. Leslie's only reply was to weep on his bosom; but soon the feelings of each were calmed for the sake of the other, and the evening passed cheerfully. Minie, whose tears were ever transient like the night-dews on the flowers, was indeed the first to smile herself and bring the smile to others.

Little did her children guess the real cause of the suffering which the fact that either Florence or Minie must leave her, occasioned Mrs. Leslie. It was not simply a mother's feeling. She was the sole retainer of a weighty truth, which in such a moment seemed to whelm her with the increased necessity for concealment.

"Father of Mercy! save me from the betrayal of the truth to my poor child," she prayed, in the silence and solitude of her own chamber. "Florence! my poor Florence! guard her from *all knowledge of the truth, till its concealment threaten increase of suffering, by unconscious sin.* Grant it, oh! grant it, even when I am gone, and may offer it no more. And now—now guide this feeble heart aright, for it dares not listen to itself. Would I keep Minie nearer to me than Florence? Will the voice of *Nature* so assert her influence now, as to stifle the voice of *Love?* Oh! let not this be. Save me from all decision save that which will be the best for both!" And calmed by that earnest prayer and trusting faith, the morrow found Mrs. Leslie once again herself.

Florence persevered in her resolution to seek employment, as resident governess in some respectable family; and Minie, as firmly resolved not to be idle, declared that her taste for fancy work should now become useful as well as an amusement. She would get their dear old landlady to dispose of the articles for her, and procure her all the materials; so Walter need not be alarmed. Though what possible harm could befall her, if she sought such employment in *propria personâ*, she could not imagine.

"Are there no other pretty people in the world, my dear fidgetty brother, that you fear such unutterable things for me? Why, if you were the Grand Seignior himself, and

I the Queen of his harem, you could not guard me more jealously," she laughingly said; and had her nature been less childlike, Walter would have found some difficulty to reply satisfactorily, without exciting an undue idea of her own importance; but such a thought never entered her mind. She knew she was lovely, but it was to her rather a source of regret than rejoicing, as it rendered her less useful than Florence, for whom her affection was so true, so reverential, that the idea of her going among strangers, was fraught with as much suffering to her as to Florence herself.

"Oh, why is not Lady St. Maur here now?" she one day said, as she clung, weeping, to her sister. "Why do you not write to her, Florence? Tell her what you are compelled to do: I am sure she would assist you."

"How! dearest Minie? What could she do for me in Rome, and I in London?"

"Oh, give you letters of recommendation to some of her friends here, who would soon find you employment. I wish you would let me write for you; I have so often thought of doing so."

"Minie, if you love me, do not think of it," replied Florence, with an expression of suffering which could not escape her sister's notice; "I could not write to Lady St. Maur now, we are too widely severed."

"Nay, Florence, I am sure you are not alluding only to distance. You think Lady Ida changed; and if you think so, I am sure you do not love her as much as I do I am sure the more you needed friendship, the more she would rejoice in bestowing it. You will find that I am a much truer prophetess than you are."

"Because you have not trusted, hoped, anticipated, and found all vain," mentally responded Florence, as her happy sister bounded away; "I could write for Walter, I could hope for him, but I cannot for myself."

CHAPTER XVIII

A SOLID ENGLISH EDUCATION.—MINIE.—OLD FRIENDS.—EMILY MELFORD'S PROMISE.

THE first applications of Florence for a situation were most dispiritingly unsuccessful. The school for governesses was overstocked by young women, who, educated far above their rank, and the expectations of their parents, (mostly petty farmers, or flourishing shopkeepers,) loaded with showy accomplishments, endowed with a sufficient quantum of assurance to display themselves to the best advantage, and sick of home by its contrast with their over-refined ideas of fashion and sentiment, offer themselves at the lowest possible terms, and are accepted, as combining all that is necessary to be acquired in the small compass of one brain.

Florence could not compete with these, and in consequence was again and again rejected, as incapacitated, by her own avowal, for the education of fashionable young ladies. One lady could not understand what she meant by a solid English education; there was surely no occasion for such instruction in England; it might be all very well for foreigners, but certainly was unnecessary for English girls. Her daughters must be accomplished, understand all the living languages, sing, paint, embroider—that was *all* she required; she knew many who would undertake to do it all. Another looked perfectly mystified as to instruction being needed in religion and morals. What possible occasion could there be for things which came so completely by instinct? She was afraid Miss Leslie stood a very poor chance of employment, if she could only profess things which in fact everybody knew, without taking the trouble to acquire them. A third turned up her hands and eyes in sentimental astonishment, that any person could attempt to teach who did not understand German—had only read Schiller in English and knew nothing of Kotzebue or Goethe. A fourth could not possibly engage her, because she was

ignorant of Latin and Greek, which she declared with the voice and look of a Roman dictator to be indispensable for the proper training of girls. Questions of phrenology, animal magnetism, chemistry, and all the *ologies* were asked by this learned lady, and poor Florence was finally dismissed with a look of most ineffable contempt. A fifth wished to know if she read novels, Austin, Edgeworth, and even Scott being enumerated in that sweeping name, and Miss Leslie was dismissed with a frown the moment she acknowledged that she did; the lady having resolved that no person likely to breathe the words, sentiment or romance, should have the honor of instructing her daughters, who, already initiated in all the mysteries of duplicity, forswearing sentiment in their mother's presence, to indulge in the most dangerous kind when alone, looked as if poor Florence's high and refined sense of such emotions could do them very little injury. There were some mothers, also, whose sole objection was that she had never been out before: they could engage no young person for whom no one except her own family could be found to speak. Alas! these trials were hard to bear, perhaps yet harder for one like Florence, whose pure and beautiful ideas of human nature, and the power of virtue and benevolence even in this world, were so continually and harshly disappointed. She had been more than once advised to write to Lady Melford, or to one of her daughters, as perhaps in their circle she might be more successful; but they had for the last two years so completely neglected her, that she shrunk in suffering from any such appeal.

Just about this time, when Florence was compelled to relax her exertions, from not knowing where next to apply, an offer was made to Mrs. Leslie which might materially have altered the fortunes of both sisters Minie's exquisite voice and extraordinary beauty, had attracted the attention of a family intimate with one of Mrs. Leslie's few confidential friends. They were foreigners, one of whom was associated with the Italian Opera, in rather an influential position. He offered to take Minie into his own family, then about to return to Italy, give her the best instruction, and so bring her forward, that

on her returning to England, her fortune would be made. Mrs. Leslie listened, and questioned with apparent calmness, but with a wrung heart. How did they intend her child to take advantage of this undoubtedly generous proposal—as a private professor, simply to teach? The reply was a decided negative; there surely could be no hesitation in her accepting an engagement as *prima donna*, when there was not the smallest doubt of her ultimate success—she was so graceful, so gifted, a very little training would be sufficient to make her first-rate as an actress, as a singer. They argued well, but Mrs. Leslie was an English mother—heart and soul an Englishwoman. She had not always been in poverty, and she carried with her to her present station all the high feelings of birth and education, which no privation, no penury could remove. She shrunk from bringing forward her gentle, modest Minie, in a situation of such equivocal tendency. Yet, did she right to refuse it? The struggle was a terrible one, and perhaps the mother could never have decided, had not Florence one day, alarmed at the suffering imprinted on her countenance, caressingly implored to know the cause, when Mrs. Leslie told her all. "Oh, do not hesitate, dearest mother," was the instant reply; "do not think of it one moment. It is neither shame nor disgrace to those destined for the stage from their childhood, and so armed against its dangers. As long as they are respectable, their profession must be so too; but it is not for those who have been thus educated to feel and think like us. Who could be with our Minie in such seasons, to prevent all associations with those of doubtful reputation, too often found in the opera *rôle?* And to do this she must go from us to a land of strangers—be exposed to neglect, perhaps severity, or, if treated with kindness, exciting such admiration, that how might we hope that she would return to us the same larling child she leaves us? No, no, dearest mother, do not think of it."

"I would not, could not, my beloved girl, save for one weighty cause—I refuse an offer of independence for her, and in so doing devolve dependence, labor, suffering upon you. Florence, how can I do this?

Easily, my own mother, for believe me, the most fatiguing toil were comparative happiness to this trial. Do not think of her,—only of my father; what anguish even the very idea of such a position for his Minie would have inflicted upon him. And of Minie herself, oh, she could never bear the suffering of such a separation."

"Do you indeed think so?" And the sudden irradiation of Mrs. Leslie's every feature, showed how eagerly she grasped at this suggestion. "If I could but think so, that she would herself refuse this offer—that she would not accuse me of selfishly sacrificing her real interests, for my, perhaps, unfounded prejudice and dread—"

"Hear her own opinion, then, dearest mother; you will find it the same as mine:" and Florence bounded away to call her sister.

She was right. With a passionate burst of tears, Minie folded her arms round her mother's neck, and conjured her not to send her so completely away—not to compel her to embrace such a profession: she would willingly teach, work, labor, any thing her mother or sister might dictate; but she was sure her voice would fail her if so tried. It was enough: the refusal was accordingly sent, gratefully, but decisively. Meanwhile Florence, feeling more than ever the absolute necessity for exertion, had just resolved on writing to Lady Melford, when she heard of that family's arrival in town. Painful as the effort would be, she thought personal application more likely to be successful than epistolary. But Walter advised her writing to Lady Edgemere in preference. Eagerly Florence caught at the idea; she wrote, and Walter himself took the letter. Unhappily, he only learned that the family were all on the continent, and would be there some time. It was a bitter disappointment, for Hope, as if the more elastic from being long kept bound, had sprung up beneath Walter's sanguine expectations, and it was hard to chain her wings again. To Lady Melford, then, she resolved on going, but she could not talk about it; and so, unknown to her mother, and even to Walter, one fine spring morning she set forth. The parks, the streets of the aristocratic West, looked gay and joyous in the sunshine; every face seemed clothed with smiles to her;

perchance they were not, but the sorrowing and careworn feel so painfully alone. London is even solitude to hundreds of its weary wanderers. Florence walked on mechanically, conscious only of that stagnating depression, so difficult to bear, and still more to overcome. She felt her cheek flushed and pale alternately, as she stood on the steps of Lord Melford's stately mansion, and her heart so throbbed, that at first she had no power to lift th knocker.

"Florence Leslie! well, this is really an unexpected pleasure: how good of you to make such an exertion," was the greeting she received from Emily Melford, who rose from her languid position with some degree of *empressement* and extended her hand. Lady Melford and Georgiana (still Miss Melford) met her the same. To a casual observer, nothing could have been kinder than their reception; but oh! how cold, how heartless the mere kindness of the lip, not of the soul, did it feel to Florence, who so trembled with suppressed emotion, that a seat was never more welcome! The very sight of their well-remembered faces, the tones of their voices, brought back the full tide of memory; and it seemed as if many more than barely four years had rolled over her head since they had parted. Her appearance had no such effect on her former friends; they had lived, rather, perhaps, existed, too long in the world, where fashion and frivolity are the presiding deities. Nothing had occurred to ruffle the current of their lives, so that years rolled by, unnoticed and unfelt. There was no reference to their former acquaintance—no allusion to her personal interests, except an inquiry after the family—whether Mrs. Leslie's health were improved—whether Mr. Leslie liked London better than the country, etc.

"I have lost my dear father," faltered Florence, vainly struggling to reply without emotion.

"I thought you knew this, Emily, and might have spared Miss Leslie the question," observed Lady Melford, as reproachfully as her quiet temper would permit.

"Oh, by the way, mamma, now you mention it, I do remember hearing, or reading something of it; and, indeed, I meant to have written to you, Florence; but it

was just at the time Sophia married, and I really had so much to think about for her, that time slipped away, till it was too late to write. I knew you were always good-natured, and trusted you would forgive the apparent neglect. I never write to any one it is such a dreadful exertion."

"Exertion!" thought Florence, as she glanced round the luxuriously furnished apartment. "Is it possible, with every want supplied, that the idea of exertion can be the excuse for not writing to a friend? Your sister Sophia is married, then," she added aloud.

"Yes, nearly a year and a-half ago, to Lord Maynard. Did you not see it in the papers? She is very happy, very rich, her lord very *devoué*, and so on. For my part, the trouble of trying on the marriage *trousseau*, the excitement, the visits, would terrify me out of all idea of matrimony. I am grown dreadfully lazy; even parties are too much trouble."

"Perhaps you have not very good health," innocently remarked Florence.

"Why, I am never particularly well, and have tried all the doctors in and out of London; but they did me no permanent good, never finding out what is the matter with me. I feel no pain, certainly—nothing, whatever, to complain; but a *je ne sais quoi* incapacitating me from all exertion."

The young lady who said this, in the most gracefully languid manner possible, looked in blooming health, almost *embonpoint*, presenting a strange contrast to the pale, pensive countenance of her visitor, whose actual livelihood depended on "exertion."

"Are you as fond of reading as you used to be?" inquired Lady Melford; and Florence answered, with more animation than she had yet spoken, in the affirmative. The Viscountess mentioned several of the fashionable works of the day. Florence blushingly avowed that her reading had lately been more amongst the older authors, and that it was only the last year or two she had become aware of their beauties.

"You must have plenty of leisure, Florence: what a happy girl you must be! I can find time for nothing,"

was Emily's rejoinder. "As to reading any thing but the lightest novel, with the round of visiting in this house, it is impossible."

Florence vainly endeavored to explain this, so as to satisfy her own mind; but the chit-chat in which they had engaged her, rendered the task at that moment impossible. How was she to introduce the real motive of her visit, was another mental question, which she found some difficulty in replying. At last Lady Melford asked how she had come—was she living near? Her answer occasioned Emily's extreme astonishment. "Walked all the way from Camberwell! what strength you must have! It really was good of you to come."

Then was the moment, and Florence, though her emotion almost choked her, seized it. Modestly, though with unconscious dignity, she removed Emily Melford's impression, that her visit was merely to renew their acquaintance, and said that the unfortunate termination of a lawsuit in the family compelled her to seek employment, and that remembering Lady Melford's former kindness, she had ventured to call, and solicit her, or her daughter's recommendation, should they know of any family requiring an English governess. Lady Melford expressed herself truly sorry, and that she feared she really had no power to assist her; yet, if she should hear of a vacant situation, she would with pleasure speak of Florence. Miss Melford looked very grave. Much as she might wish to serve Miss Leslie, she said their very slight acquaintance would hardly justify her encountering the responsibility which the recommendation of a governess must entail upon herself. Emily Melford, for the moment permitted a good heart to triumph over habitual indolence, and declared she would make every possible inquiry—would say every thing in her favor, and she had no doubt she should succeed.

"Take care, Emily, what you promise," was Lady Melford's warning observation. "You say you are not equal to the least exertion now, and this will demand a great deal."

"Indeed, mamma, I will do all I can, though of course I cannot promise success," replied Emily, unconsciously affected at the glistening eyes and flushed cheek which

were turned towards her with an expression of such grateful acknowledgment, that it made her feel for the moment they were girls again in Devonshire. Florence could not doubt her, nay, for the moment she felt it difficult to retain the wounded pride which Emily's previous unkindness and neglect had so painfully engendered. She did not know how fatally selfish indolence had deadened every good and kindly feeling—that Emily's impulses were as vivid and evanescent as the sparks from flint—never visible, save from sudden and violent friction, and then vanishing into air.

Florence at length rose to go; they asked her to stay and dine, and, on her refusing, begged her to come whenever she felt inclined for the exertion; they should always be happy to see her.

"It is a shame even to ask you to make such an exertion Florence; for it would kill me, I am sure. You surely will not walk home?"

"No," Florence said; most probably she should return home by one of the public conveyances.

"What, alone? Ah, I always said you were meant for a heroine, Florence."

"Not much of one, dear Emily, for I believe a heroine would hardly be so *unwillingly* independent as I am compelled to be. Exertion is indeed no new thing to me, and I must regard it still less, henceforth, than I have hitherto done."

As Florence descended the stairs, two young men ran hastily against her, then paused to look at her, half in doubt, half in inquiry, politely apologized, an apology merely acknowledged by a graceful bow, and the gentlemen bounded into the drawing-room. "Who, in the world, is that pale, elegant girl?" exclaimed one. "Pretty she is not, but something better—graceful, *distinguée*. Who is she?"

"Is it possible you have so completely forgotten her Alfred? Why, Florence Leslie."

"*That* Florence Leslie? What, Ida's favorite Flower of St. John's? What a fool not to know her! Where has she hid herself all this time?"

"Why did you not come in before? you would have

known all, then, without my having the trouble of telling you—for pity's sake remember my nerves.

"I beg pardon of your nerves, Emily, but I will know something more of Florence—she was such a merry companion once. Come, Frank, by the way, you used to admire her, too." And young Melford, regardless of all remonstrances, alike from his sisters or his companion, ran down the stairs, dragging Frank along with him, and speedily overtook Florence, who, fatigued and depressed by long suppressed emotion, had proceeded but a very short way. "Miss Leslie, I have run after you on purpose to entreat your forgiveness for my stupidity in not recognising you," was his address in a tone so truly respectful, that it quickly subdued the alarm experienced by Florence in finding herself so followed. "Ah," he continued, as she accepted his apology with a bright blush, and lively smile, "if you had looked as you do now when I first met you, I should have recognised you directly; should not you, Howard?"

"I fancied Miss Leslie's countenance familiar to me, even in the first momentary glance," was the reply; and Florence's attention, awakened by the name, she glanced hastily towards him, answering his greeting by a silent bow.

Howard! could this be the handsome intelligent boy, with whom she had danced so often on that ever-memorable night, the night of Lady Ida's ball? whose round jacket and Byron collar had so often excited Emily Melford's raillery on Florence's odd propensity for unfledged (*i. e.*, uncoated) men? It must be, for the countenance was the same, only mellowed into more manly beauty; and the slight boyish form had so sprung up into the graceful, yet muscular proportions of a tall, aristocratic-looking man, that it seemed strange to Florence that only four years could have wrought such a change, making him appear so much her senior, when he was in fact her junior by a year.

"Well, Miss Leslie, I hope we shall have our long exiled Ida home soon," observed young Melford, after gayly conversing on their former acquaintance, and the many enjoyments of St. John's. "There is some talk of Lord St. Maur receiving some high office at home in

return for his services abroad; and then of course you will see Ida. She is not one to forget old friends"

CHAPTER XIX.

FLORENCE A GOVERNESS.—WALTER IS ILL.—TRIALS.—A MESSAGE.

LITTLE as Florence expected kindness from Lady Melford's family, she did not, could not believe that Emily's professions of interest were so completely without foundation, that she actually never again thought of Florence or her wishes, until a note from Florence several weeks afterwards, informing her that she had obtained a situation, and therefore that she needed no further exertion on the part of her friends, recalled to the oblivious young lady that she had made no exertion at all. It did occasion a passing qualm, which she would gladly not have felt, but indolence speedily crept over her to deaden even this. It was too much trouble to think of what could not be remedied, and so she quietly resigned herself to forgetfulness. No doubt she would have expressed pleasure had Florence crossed her path, but as to seeking her, Emily Melford would have shunned the exertion as an impossibility. *Little* things were too *large* for her.

Florence had indeed at length succeeded in obtaining employment. A widow lady with a grown-up son, and two little girls, had lately taken a house in the vicinity of Norwood, coming, it was said, from Hampshire, where all her friends and family still lived. She was one of the old school, prim, severe, and very reserved, and Florence felt her heart sink within her at the first conference. Her qualifications were asked, in one cold measured tone, Mrs. Russel offered remuneration with most unusual liberality, and Florence closed at once.

We will not linger on the anguish of the separation, the bitter parting of that beloved one from the home of her childhood, for the cold hearth of strangers. It is a pang we fear that will find its echo in too many hearts. Yet there are some in this chequered world of ours who are

insensible to the voice of home, unconscious of its peculiar sanctity, for they gladly turn from it, preferring even dependence to resting in a lowly sphere: and some there are who, fostered in wealth, happiness, and luxury, thoughtlessly look on the young instructress as one born to labor and endure, unconscious that there are as deep fountains of sorrow and love in her hidden breast as in her own. That, perhaps, the object of their neglect or their contempt has, like them, a fond mother, whose hearth, as her heart, is desolate for the departed—brothers, sisters, yearning to look upon her face again, and towards whom, her lonely spirit turns so longingly and so vainly.

It was long, very long, ere poor Florence could feel in any degree reconciled to this great change. Peculiarly clingingly domestic, her affections, with the sole exception of Lady St. Maur, concentrated in her own family. She did, indeed, feel lonely, as she passed evening after evening in her solitary room, released from her charge regularly as the clock struck seven. Speaking to none, seemingly cared for by none; alone, though often the house was full. She thought at first she should enjoy these hours, as enabling her to pursue her favorite employments: but oh! how changed and sad they seemed, as if they could scarcely be the same which had engaged her, when her mother's eye was beaming on her, her sister's sweet voice in its laugh or song thrilling to her heart, her brother's soul-expressive face, bending over his writing, or lifted up to her's asking her sympathy with some favorite book, and though but a few miles separated, how utterly was she alone!

Her mind was, however, too well regulated to encourage such weakening sorrow. Mrs. Russel was no physiognomist, and she could not read in the pale countenance she looked on regularly every morningat a specified hour and for a specified time, any thing more than was perfectly natural. She knew nothing of Florence's history, and did not think it beseeming in her to inquire. As to eliciting any just praise, it was a thing impossible. She had explained to Miss Leslie her educational plans—sat in

the school-room several mornings to see them followed, and then no longer interfered.

It was not pride which actuated this conduct; but that Florence, as the chosen instructress of her children, could be a person demanding the suffrages and respect of society, were notions, as much too visionary for Mrs. Russel as they are to very many others. The creed, that instructors of youth are real benefactors of their kind, and should be regarded with respect and gratitude, may be excellent in theory, but in practice—let the fact decide—the moment a young woman is compelled to teach for her subsistance, she sinks at once into a lower grade.

Months glided by slowly and sadly for our heroine. It s a false doctrine to promulgate, that the performance of listasteful duties at once brings happiness. If it did, surely there could be no trial to perform, no temptetion to elude them.

Our heavenly Father sends no trial, no sorrow, to be felt as *pleasure*, as some would make us believe. For our good indeed, our eternal good; but would He hold forth this blessed goal, did we refuse to labor, in care and sorrow to obtain it? No, sorrow indeed *is* blessed, for there is a still small voice urging us on, encouraging and consoling, but many weary months must pass ere mournful duties become joys.

Happy, Florence was not. She had too many sources of disquiet; but the first stupifying influence of sorrow and change had been conquered by fervent prayer and increasing effort, and she became reconciled to her weary path. The act of teaching became easier from use; even Mrs. Russel's stiff and chilling manner became more endurable, and gratefully did she feel that to write cheerfully home was less an effort than it had been.

Florence had been six months with Mrs. Russel, when her anxiety was fearfully aroused by a letter from Minie. Walter had appeared more languid than usual for several weeks, but still persisted in saying he was perfectly well, and in attending to his business, a few days previously, he had been conveyed home in his master's carriage in an almost exhausted state; the head clerk had accompanied him, and given the alarming information, that he had

several successive days fainted at his desk, but that no persuasion, no argument, could prevail on him to give up. He had rallied, Minie continued to say, and was decidedly better, but his mother had forbidden, and his employers had absolutely refused his services till his strength should be properly restored.

Florence's first impulse was to return home instantly, that her deep anxiety might be either removed or justified Her next thought compelled restraint and control; for Mrs. Russel had left home on a visit to some of her relations, and her return was uncertain. She could not leave her charge. Every post indeed brought her intelligence; but what were written assurances to a mind fancying every evil and longing to lavish on the sufferer all the affection with which her heart was filled? At length she looked once more on the hand-writing of her brother. It was but a few lines, but oh, how inexpressibly precious to their reader!

"Florence, dearest Florence," it ran—"at length I may trace that dear name again. Oh! how painful I yearn to feel you by my side, to listen to your gentle voice; but it is an idle wish, my Florence; I have been ill, they tell me, very ill; but I think they say more than the fact to keep me content at home; they think thus to reconcile me to idleness and rest. Florence, Florence, how can this be? How can I be content when so much, nay, all must depend on me? There was a time, that no pang was joined with the dream of death; but now, now—oh! if I must die, what will become of my beloved ones? Who is there to work for them, to save them from privation and its hundred woes? I know this is sinful mistrust—I strive against it—Florence, pray for me, I cannot for myself. I know your tears are falling at these wild and sinful words; forgive them, Florence, dearest, kindest. God forever bless you and preserve you to your WALTER."

Vainly, for several successive hours did Florence struggle with her emotion. She knew her brother so well, that for him to give vent to such despondency, his spirits must be sunk indeed. Yet she had to teach with a sinking frame and sickening heart; to answer the innumerable questions of her prattling companions; to compel them to

attention and obedience; to walk out with them, and then again resume the afternoon routine of work and study: and not till the return of Mrs. Russel in the evening relieved her of her charge, had she leisure so to compose her agitated spirits as to think calmly. Would it be wise to go to her brother? Walter had tender nurses, most affectionate friends; he wanted nothing which they could give. Would it then be right to give up her present situation merely for the consolation of being with him? No, she would work on, if it were but to provide luxuries and comforts for him; and the ardent girl clasped her hands, and raised her swollen eyes in fervent thanksgiving, that to do so was in her power. She pondered deeply how she could increase her salary. Her pupils had just commenced drawing, but Mrs. Russel was not satisfied with their instructor; and Florence, convinced that she was capable of teaching that accomplishment, indulged the hope that Mrs. Russel would gladly accept her services instead, and raise her salary accordingly. She had just brought her meditations to this conclusion, feeling equal to any exertion, and believing the greatest misfortune which could now befall her, would be to be dismissed from her present employment, when a message was delivered to her, that Mrs. Russel wished to speak with her in the parlor. It was a summons so unprecedented, that Florence, already in a painfully excited state, had scarcely courage to obey—trembling with forebodings that new evils were impending, which she should have no power to resist.

CHAPTER XX.

MRS. RUSSEL.—HASTY CONCLUSION.—INJUSTICE.—DISMISSAL.—GRIEF.—A MOTHER'S LOVE.

MRS. RUSSEL was sitting with more than her usual stiffness in her old-fashioned chair, her visage grim and frowning, with an expression round the mouth, plainly indicating that she had formed some resolution which no power on earth could change. A slight, scarcely per-

ceptible movement of the head acknowledged the entrance and meek obedience of Florence; but no sign nor word authorized her to be seated. There was a short, dry cough on the part of the lady, followed by a hum and ha, and then:

"Miss Leslie," she demanded shortly; "pray are you acquainted with Mrs. Rivers, of Woodlands, near Winchester?"

"Yes, Madam, she is a connection of the family, and has been——"

"Miss Leslie, I asked an answer, not a commentary: you resided with her, I presume? joined in society at Winchester?"

"Yes, madam," replied Florence, briefly.

"Then, Miss Leslie, I must inform you that your services henceforth are dispensed with. My daughters are much too young and inexperienced to be left to your charge. You have deceived me egregiously, by daring to obtain a footing in my family as a respectable person, when you must be quite aware you can lay no claim to such a character. Here is the sum total of my debt for your services, and a trifle in addition, as I wish to do nothing unhandsomely: we part to-morrow, and as there is no occasion for any further rejoinder, you may retire."

Stunned, yet bewildered, Florence had listened to this most extraordinary harangue; she could not comprehend to what Mrs. Russel could refer. At any other time, natural indignation would have given her not only voice, but eloquence; but now, depressed, almost exhausted by the emotions of the day, she felt as if she had not energy enough to articulate a single word. At that moment she thought of Walter; how could she aid him if thus sent away, not only deprived of employment, but of character? The color returned to her pale cheek, and to any other than Mrs. Russel, the modest firmness, alike of her voice and manner, would have been sufficient proof of innocence.

"If, madam," she said, "you have lost all confidence in me, you are right to decline my services; but you must pardon me, if I refuse to retire, until you have informed me of what you accuse me; I deny all deception towards you, nor am I in the very least aware how I have forfeited

my claim to respectability, as you are pleased to assert. My conscience is free from all intentional offence from any conduct that would unfit me for the guidance of youth."

"Of your conduct, whilst under my roof, I have nothing to complain," replied Mrs. Russel, unmoved by the suppressed, but visible emotion with which Florence spoke; "but Miss Leslie, you must be aware, however you may now repent of former follies, and resolve to amend them, that a young person, whose conduct in Winchester was such as to make her name a term of opprobrium to all its inhabitants, can be no fit companion for young people. My son is returning from the continent, and I wish to have no person with my daughters whose character for flirtation and coquetry would render his visits to his sister's study, equally unsafe and unpleasant. Your varying color, Miss Leslie, is sufficient answer; you have compelled me to speak plainly, and now I hope you are perfectly satisfied as to the justice of my decision."

Florence's color did, indeed, vary; for gradually, but slowly, the conviction dawned upon her, that Mrs. Russel was confounding her with her cousin Flora. Rallying every energy, she forced herself to relate the real facts, and solemnly assert that at the time Flora Leslie's conduct had been most reprehensible, she had been residing in London with her newly widowed mother. No change, however took place in the sour visage of Mrs. Russel.

"She had heard," she said, "but of one Miss Leslie whose name was, people reported, Florence; and if there were two Miss Leslies residing at Woodlands, of names so exactly similar, it was strange no one had ever heard of it."

"Pardon me, madam, it was scarcely strange; I very seldom entered into society, and latterly, indeed, not at all, for I was then in mourning for my dear father."

"You may be speaking truth, Miss Leslie, I will not take upon myself to contradict," replied the lady, who, by the way, prided herself on her rigid love of justice; "but you must permit me to ask you what proof, except your own family, who, of course, will repeat the same tale, can you bring forward to convince me I am wrong, and you are right?"

"Proofs, madam, indeed, I have none, was Florence's mild reply, though the indignant blood had dyed her cheeks; "for of Mrs. Rivers, I have unhappily lost all trace, and Flora, now Mrs. Major Hardwicke, even if I knew her address, would scarcely do me justice by implicating herself."

"That is to say, you have lost all traces of Mrs. Rivers through your own misconduct, an inference tallying exactly with the reports I have heard, and of course you cannot know Miss Flora Leslie's address, as, in my opinion, no such person exists. Oh, for shame! for shame! young as you are, to be so hardened in guilt! Well, well, I desire you to retire, for you must perceive your improbable tale weighs little against the reports and warnings I have received."

"I will obey you, madam," replied Florence, struggling with the indignant pride, which the cruel belief that she had spoken falsely even at that moment called; "Thank God I have yet a mother's faithful love, and sinless home, to which I may return, and may that God who knows my perfect innocence, forgive you the injustice you have shown me!".

And with a proud step, but bursting heart, Florence turned from the parlor. She paused not till she reached her own apartment; but then sinking on a chair, she buried her aching temples in her hands; she could not weep, though her eyes felt starting from her head; her character taken from her, without the possibility of proving how falsely; how could she obtain employment—how assist her brother? the future was all dark, she could not penetrate its folds, save to look on sorrow.

Great, indeed, was the surprise and pleasure of Mrs. Leslie's little family, when about noon the following day, Florence made her appearance.

"Florence, my own sister, this is kind indeed," exclaimed Walter, half rising from his recumbent posture, to fold her in his arms; "I hardly dared hope a personal answer to my murmuring letter; but I am better, much better. Mother, am I not? why, I am sure you look paler, and more suffering than I do. Florence. there is something more the matter than my illness—what is it?"

"Nay, was not that enough, dearest Walter, to make me anxious," she replied, struggling to smile; but the effort only increased her brother's alarm, the more so, as he perceived that her lip so quivered, that she could only cling closer to him, and cover his pale brow with kisses.

"Florence, my child, speak to me—what has chanced? you are ill, unhappy, and would hide it; but you cannot; come to me, love, come to your mother's heart, you will find rest there."

"Mother," gasped poor Florence, throwing herself on her knees beside her mother, and laying her throbbing head on her bosom; "I have come to you discarded, accused, condemned, sent from the house where I have striven night and day to do my duty, as one wholly unfitted by previous conduct for my charge, my word disbelieved, my whole family implicated in the charge of deception: oh, mother—mother—teach me how to bear this heavy trial! I have no strength—no——"

Her sobs impeded further speech, and she saw not the effect of her words on her mother, whose cheeks and lips became of a livid whiteness, while the large beads of moisture gathered on her brow.

"Who has dared to malign you?" exclaimed Walter, springing from his couch with the strength of sudden excitement; "Florence, my stainless Florence, who has dared to charge you with aught of shame? tell me, only tell me; I have strength enough to defend you."

But, even as he spoke, he sunk back exhausted; and fearing to agitate him still more, Florence briefly but clearly related the interview between her and Mrs. Russel, adding her own suppositions as to the origin of the charge against her.

"God of mercy! I thank thee, and this is all!" ejaculated Mrs. Leslie, in a voice of such fervent thanksgiving, it sounded almost strangely to her children; and rising with recovered power, she folded Florence to her bosom. "Heed it not, my beloved girl; heed not the false accusations of the unjust and prejudiced; we know—God knows—that you are innocent; be comforted, my child."

"How may I be comforted, mother, when slander is

abroad, and busy with my name? how dare I seek another situation till my innocence is proved, and yet how can I rest in idleness at home?"

A low suppressed groan from Walter filled up the momentary pause.

"My child, He who feedeth the sparrow, and clotheth the lilies of the field, will protect and provide for us; oh! trust Him, dearest, and He will not forsake us. Tell me, only tell me there is comfort in your mother's home, my child; that there, at least, your innocence shall be your strength, and trust our heavenly Father for the rest."

Florence did not reply, but her tears flowed less bitterly, and gradually composure returned. When partially recovered from her own sorrow, Florence became conscious of the great change in Walter; reduced almost to a skeleton, his cheeks sunken, and only too often dyed with appalling crimson; his beautiful eyes, lustrous as they were wont to be, but seemingly larger, from the attenuation of his other features, the blue veins on his clear brow so distinctly visible, that almost might be traced the languid current beneath; the parched lip; the prostrating weakness, each day confirmed, all revealed the insidious disease which had already claimed him.

Great as was Mrs. Leslie's trust in a merciful, overruling Providence, she neglected nothing that could *prove* that Florence and Flora Leslie were two persons, by making every inquiry for Mrs. Rivers; but unhappily all her efforts failed. Woodlands was let; the steward and those of Mrs. Rivers' old retainers, who had lingered on the estate while he was there, had all disappeared; and Mrs. Leslie, with an aching, but still faithful heart, was compelled to dismiss all hopes of earthly justice, and strive to rest her own hope and that of her child, on that heavenly Judge, who would not forever leave them wronged.

CHAPTER XXI.

GENIUS.—THE MANUSCRIPT.

THE winter passed with little change to the Leslie family. Florence, at length, obtained engagements as daily governess in two or three families, an employment infinitely more arduous than her former undertaking; but all weariness and anxiety were soothed by the privilege of returning to her own home, at six o'clock every evening. How often, as she walked to her different pupils, in all the miseries of a London winter, the rain splashing in pools around her, saturating her dress, or the sleet, and snow, and wind driving so full against her, as to demand the exertion of all her little strength to struggle against them, did her thoughts revert to the happy past, and the friends there associated!

"How little did I then dream of my present life," thought Florence sadly; "better that I did not, for I should have shrunk from its anticipation with even deeper suffering that I do from its performance. I am more worthy of Lady Ida's affections now than then, and yet she cannot value, for she will not meet me now."

It was strange how often the form and face of Francis Howard mingled in these reminiscences of Lady St. Maur; how stealthily, and often unconsciously she found the wish arising, that in her daily walks she might chance to meet him, speak with him again, and the wish would often return, in spite of her fixed resolve to banish it whenever it arose. But with all their economy, all the labor of these two devoted girls, for Minie worked at home, perseveringly as Florence taught abroad, they could but clear their way, and provide Walter with the luxuries, the delicacies, his state of bodily suffering so painfully demanded. The winter, too, was always peculiarly trying to Mrs. Leslie, and all seemed to devolve on the sisters, who cared not for any personal labor, so that smiles brightened the

countenance of those beloved ones for whom they toiled; and, in spite of the gnawing care experienced by both mother and son, those smiles did await them still.

To Minie, even the decided ills of poverty were never felt as such; her light spirits rebounded from every casual trial, as if it had no more power to darken the bright heaven of her joy, than the snow-flake can sully the grass which receives it. And truly she was the angel of that lowly home; her mother forgot increasing infirmity and despending hopes; her sister, her heavy burden of care, even her consuming anxiety for Walter, when Minie smiled, or carolled, or gave vent in gleesome words to the bursting joyousness of her little heart. It was scarcely strange that Minie felt no painful anticipations with regard to Walter; but it certainly was, that Mrs. Leslie should have been so completely unconscious of his danger. Yet so it was, he suffered apparently so little, his mind was so bright, so strong, so unfailing, that though he regained no strength, his mother could not believe the near vicinity of death. She had been so many years herself hovering on the threshold of that awful bourne, and still she passed it not, that she could not realize it with regard to her cherished, her gifted boy.

To Florence alone, the whole extent of calamity hanging over them appeared revealed; she could not shake off the conviction that her beloved brother was in truth "passing away," that the summer would return with all lovely things, but find not the poet there.

One day, about the middle of February, Florence, returning some hours earlier from her daily avocations than usual, prevailed on her mother and Minie to accept the invitation of a friend residing further in the country, and remained alone with her brother; several manuscripts were lying on a table near him, but, as was sometimes the case, he had sunk into a sort of doze, and fearing to disturb him, she sat down to continue Minie's work, which lay on a table in the recess of a window, half hidden by the curtains; for nearly an hour she heard no movement, but then aroused by the rustling of paper, she turned towards the couch. Walter was glancing over his manu-

scripts, and there was a deep flush on his cheek, a sparkle in his eye, giving eloquent answer to the thoughts he read.

"And will ye, too, perish?" she heard him murmur, as if wholly unconscious of her presence—"Will ye, too, fade away and be forgotten, when the mind that has framed, the hand that has traced ye, shall lie mouldering in the grave? will no kindly spirit throb and bound beneath your spell; no gentle heart find in ye an answer? Oh, blessed, indeed, is that poet's lot, who wins the applause of a world, the love, the reverence, the blessing of the gifted and the good—who feels he has not lived, nor loved, nor sorrowed in vain! But the poet, to whom these things are all denied; who passeth from this beauteous earth, unknown, unloved, his name with his body buried in the cold, shrouding folds of death. Father! oh, my father, have mercy on thy child!" and covering his face with his spread hands, Florence beheld him give way to a burst of such irrepressible agony, that the hot tears made their way between his transparent hands, and the attenuated frame shook with sobs.

Trembling with sympathizing emotion, Florence sank back in the chair she had quitted; she longed to throw herself on his neck, to beseech him to be comforted, to breathe of hope, but she felt she dared not; at length, and unable to resist the impulse, she glided forward and knelt beside him.

"Florence, my beloved sister! oh, I have terrified you, I forgot your presence, imagined myself alone; dearest, heed it not, I am better now, it was bodily weakness, only weakness, which will overpower me sometimes; you must not mind me."

It was several minutes ere Florence could reply; but as quickly as she could, she reverted to those treasured manuscripts, beseeching him to let her read them, it was so long since she had done so. With a faint smile he acceded. Florence, herself, was surprised; never had it seemed to her that such beautiful imagery, such glowing thought, such touching pathos had breathed so powerfully in his compositions before. A new spirit appeared to have lighted on them; they were mostly detached pieces, forming, indeed, a treasured volume. He showed her, too, the

beautiful designs with which it was to be illustrated; and Florence no longer marvelled at the burst of agony wrung from him by the thought, that these emanations, of no common genius, must pass away and be forgotten; but even she guessed not the real reason of his longing, and the poet betrayed it not.

"I dreamed," he said mournfully, "when in all the glow and heat of composition, that I was bequeathing a glorious gift to my country, wreathing my name with immortality. I seemed to forget all the difficulties, the impossibilities, which prevented the attainment of my darling wish; but now, dearest, now I feel it is a shadow that I have sought, a vain, shapeless shadow; it needs influence, wealth, or, to say the least, *a name*, and I have neither—no, no, they must die with me."

"Die!" murmured Florence, almost inaudibly, and she paused in deep and mournful thought; "but if you were strong and well, Walter, would you not make some effort yourself? at least ask the opinion of some good publisher; it might not then be so impossible as it now seems."

"If I were well, oh! Florence, I should do many things, and this would be one of them, I own; but I dare not think of this," he added hurriedly, and evidently with pain, "the struggle for submission has been mine only too lately. I know not how to trace, to love the mandate that chaineth me a useless burden to my couch, when every exertion is needed to support my beloved mother, and my helpless sisters; and yet, oh, Florence! morning noon and night, I pray to see and feel this; for my better spirit tells me that good it must be, or it would not come from an all-loving God."

"And He will grant us both this blessed trust, in his own good time, my brother; but in this case, dearest Walter, let me act for you, trust the manuscripts to me, and let me endeavor to do with them as you would yourself."

Her brother looked at her with affection and astonishment.

"You know not the difficulties you undertake, my Florence," he said; "how many hopes will be raised, only to be disappointed; how much fatigue encountered——"

"I care not," was her instant answer; "I am so accus

tomed now to independent wanderings, that even the crowded streets of London have lost their terrors: do not fear for me; and if I should succeed, Walter, dear Walter, what would previous disappointments, previous anxiety be then?"

The beaming countenance of the young poet was her truest answer, and once the precious MSS. deposited in her hands, Florence permitted no difficulty to deter her; weary, and often exhausted as she felt from seven, sometimes eight successive hours passed in teaching, she would not return home, till she had accomplished something in the furtherance of her trust. Conquering even her extreme repugnance to walking about the metropolis after the lamps were lighted, it was often near eight in the evening before she returned home. Even there, every nerve was tightly strung, that she might not evince the least fatigue, or appear desponding; for the anxious glance of her brother awaited her; the hope she had excited lighting up his pale cheek and beautiful eye with the seeming glow of health. Yet both mutually avoided the subject. Florence dreading to impart all the disappointments, which she did, in truth, encounter; and Walter, from physical weakness, absolutely failing in courage to ask a single question, well knowing that were there hope to give, Florence would not continue silent.

It would be useless to linger on the disheartening task which the devoted sister so cheerfully undertook; but at length her perseverance seemed about to be rewarded.

CHAPTER XXII.

A KIND FRIEND.—THE PUBLISHER.—THE PHYSICIAN.

As Florence would not have any of the letters concerning the poems directed at home, it so chanced that she received one of the numerous rejections in the hours of teaching. The disappointment imprinted on her countenance attracted the attention of a benevolent old relation of her pupils, who frequently visited the school room.

He inquired the cause so feelingly that the poor girl's overburdened heart instantly opened, and she timidly and briefly imparted some particulars.

Mr. Wilson listened with much interest; then asking for pen and paper, he wrote very intently for a few minutes, and then placed a note directed to one of the first publishers of the day, in her hand. "Take this, my good girl," he said kindly; "it will at least gain you attention. I wish I could do more; but you know we must be just before we are generous; and if I did all I might wish, I should be wronging my own. Do not look so speechlessly grateful, my child; use the note, and God speed you."

And, pressing her hand, he instantly departed; but his kind offices did not stop there. The day was unusually fine, and Mr. Wilson begged a holyday for his young relatives, ostensibly that he might give them a drive, but really that Florence might have the leisure to prosecute her mission at once; and she felt it such, for her heart swelled in asking a blessing on the kind old man, though he would not return to her school-room to hear it.

Anxiously yet hopefully, Florence threaded her way through the huge labyrinth of streets, to the parks, in the vicinity of which the publisher resided. The note gained her instant attention, and one glance sufficed for her to perceive that Mr. Morton was very different from many of his calling; entering at once into the business, he candidly stated that poetry, unless of the very first kind, was the most unsaleable sort of composition, but added kindly, "But of this you know we cannot judge till we have perused the MS.; have you it with you?"

She answered in the affirmative, placing as she did so the work before him. He saw that her hand trembled and her cheek paled, and said with a smile, "Why, were it not for my friend's note, I should say, Miss Leslie, that you yourself were the author; we seldom see a third person so deeply interested. You have not been playing us false, have you? and passing off as your brother's that which is your own?"

"Indeed, sir, I have not; but when I know and feel how completely the being of a beloved and suffering

brother is bound up in his glorious talent, I cannot be otherwise than agitated; a very casual glance over those poems will convince you that no woman's work is there."

Surprised, yet prepossessed by her unaffected earnestness, Mr. Morton, after some further conversation, gave his whole attention for nearly half an hour to the MS. Florence tried to look at some beautiful prints which he had kindly placed before her; but a mist was before her eyes, she could not trace a figure.

"You are right," he said at length; "this is no common work. There is decided genius, not alone in the poems, but in the illustrations; still, in the present state of literature, even real genius has much to contend with. Can you call again in a few days? Be assured," he added, kindly, "I do not give you that trouble because I will not say *No* at once. I wish to think how I can best serve your brother, and to do so requires a little time."

With every limb trembling, every accent of her voice quivering, Florence poured forth her acknowledgments, and assuring him the trouble was nothing, the following Saturday was the day fixed. The intervening time seemed long, for Florence breathed to none the hope that would arise in her own breast. When she again sought Mr Morton he told her that his opinion of her brother's genius had increased with every page he read; that there was not the smallest doubt as to its ultimate success. He candidly stated that the volume was intrinsically worth much more than he could well afford to pay, and he thought it would be better for the author to incur a little risk at first than do himself such injustice as to part with the copyright. To bring the work out as its merits demanded would cost one hundred and fifty pounds. He himself would risk the hundred, if Mr. Leslie would risk the fifty pounds, the profits of the first edition should be equally divided between them.

We will not linger on the emotion of poor Florence at this generous offer Morton, indeed, needed little in reply; his benevolent nature was more gratified by her simple yet heartfelt acknowledgments than by the most eloquent words. He would call on her brother, he said, that their agreement might be fixed in black and white, smiling at

her observation that surely such a step could not be necessary.

"We men of business must have something more palpable than honor, my young friend; besides I wish to know this glorious minded fellow. You tell me he is ill, so ill that he cannot leave his couch. What is the matter with him?" Florence's voice quivered painfully as she replied, but Mr. Morton's evident sympathy led her not only to relate Walter's sufferings, but her own secret and long entertained wish, that he should have better medical advice. A gentleman had entered some little time before, and perceiving Morton was engaged, had begged him to continue his business with the young lady; and, apparently on very intimate terms with the family, threw himself on an easy chair and took up a book, to which, however, he did not give much attention.

"And this young man is a poet, and by your account, Morton, no common one. I am sorry for it," was the quaint observation which recalled his presence; and Florence timidly looked the question, "Why?"

"Because, young lady, too often the mind wears out the frame. The physician's skill is less effectual with poets than with any other race; they are like the pelican feeding their offspring with their own blood, and are then surprised that we can do nothing for them."

"Perhaps you will go with me, Sir Charles, and see if this young poet be as wilful as others of his craft," rejoined Mr. Morton, knowing well the character of his visiter, and encouraged by his nod of assent.

Florence listened bewildered; she could scarcely believe that her wildest wishes might be realized, and that the object of her secret longings, the great physician, who, she almost believed, had, under Providence, power to avert death itself, would indeed visit her brother, and might perhaps restore him to health, as he had so mercifully been permitted to restore others: and Mr. Morton had led her down stairs, had advised her not to tell her brother that a physician would accompany him, fearing to excite him, and had parted from her with the greatest kindness, ere she could collect her scattered thoughts sufficiently to arrange and define them.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CROSS AND CHAIN.—IS THERE NO HOPE?

It so happened that, just at this time, Mrs. Leslie was staying with a very aged relation in the country; and, for one reason, Florence rejoiced that she was absent. As soon as collected thought returned, she began to consider how the necessary fifty pounds could be raised with the least inconvenience, and without calling on her mother. She recollected that, from teaching and work, she and Minie had laid aside fifteen pounds for chance demands—debts they had none—and they expected in a few days a good price for some delicate fancy work; still this would not make up half the sum. The only valuable trinkets she possessed were Lady St. Maur's gifts, the cross and chain, the emeralds in which, she had often been told, were exceedingly rare and valuable; but how could she part with them?

She saw, after his first feelings of delight, that Walter though he said nothing, shrunk painfully from the idea that it might be months before the small sum required from him could be paid. Had he been in health, and so enabled to work himself, these thoughts would have had no power; but with all the torturing weakness of disease they haunted him night and day. Florence saw this, and acted accordingly.

About a week after this arrangement with Mr. Morton, and before he called, she placed a pocket-book containing bank-notes to the specified amount in her brother's hands.

"Florence!" he exclaimed, starting up, the languor of suffering for the moment banished. "Florence, dearest! how have you done this? Oh! do not tell me you have sacrificed aught of comfort or of personal necessities—weak, selfish, tormenting as disease has made me, I could not bear such a thought—how have you obtained this?"

"Suppose I refuse to tell you, Walter; I think I have some right to enjoy my secret; will you be satisfied if I

solemnly assure you I have sacrificed nothing that was either of use or comfort? some useless trinkets—"

"Trinkets! useless trinkets! Ah, Florence, dearest, how can I bear the thought that you have parted with your few valuables for me!"

"You shall give me handsomer, Walter; I shall expect a casket of gems from the earnings of your first brilliant successful work; what need of them have I now? When you raise me to a higher grade, where ornaments are worn, you shall return them to me."

She spoke with a smile so fond, that her brother guessed not how, in parting with her only jewel of value, she felt as if even memory had become as powerless as hope, and every link between the past and present snapped forever.

"My work may give you them, my darling sister, but not Walter," he answered faintly; "I shall have gone to my long home ere these things may be."

"Oh, do not, do not say so, Walter; the reviving spring will soon be here, and relieved as your mind is of this engrossing wish—oh, you will live—you will be spared to bless us all."

He shook his head mournfully, but kissed her fondly, and changed the subject.

In a few days Mr. Morton and his friend came. The flush of excitement burned on Walter's cheek; his thin hand so trembled, he could hardly sign his name, and the perspiration streamed with the effort from his forehead Florence had lingered to try to read Sir Charles's opinion on his countenance; but it would not change, and, unable to bear the deadly faintness of suspense, she glided from the apartment, satisfied that Minie would supply her place

"You are really premature, my good friend," Mr Morton said, as after a lengthened conversation full of the deepest interest and comfort to Walter, he gave the pocket book, and Morton looked on its contents with surprise "There would have been time enough for this, when the book was in print, and circulating. You had better keep this money for little luxuries which an invalid like yourself must need."

Walter paused a moment, then saying, "Minie, dear, I

wish you would look in my room for the book I wanted to show Mr. Morton. Florence will tell you where it is." He waited till she left the room, then laying his hand on Mr. Morton's arm, said impressively—"Mr. Morton, that hour I shall *never* see; let me, then, have the happiness, the relief of feeling that I die leaving no debt as a burden on my poor family; do not refuse it. My own, in truth, it is not, for my devoted sisters have compelled me to accept it for this purpose, simply to relieve my mind of the load that weighed upon it: take it, and I shall feel that I have not an individual care. Your assurance, that in time it must succeed, removes all fear for my sisters; their generous love will be repaid."

Much affected, Morton pressed his hand, and entreated him to set his mind at rest, and not to dwell on such gloomy fancies—he was sure they had no foundation. If Florence had still been in the room, she would not have watched Sir Charles's expressive countenance in vain; a mournful interest first removed the unimpassioned calm; then strong emotion, and finally he rose from his seat and strode to the window. Recalled by Morton's question if he could not prescribe for Mr. Leslie, to prevent such a constant recurrence of excitement; he asked no question, but hastily wrote a prescription, saying as he did so

"This will calm, I wish I could say cure, young man; change your ardent temperament, your throbbing brain, for the matter of fact, the unimpassioned, and health may return."

"Change!" responded Walter, clasping his hands with strong emotion—"change!—become like the crowd—the hireling herd—that know no emotion but interest, no love but for gold—with no vision of beauty, of truth, of good! No, no; better twenty years of suffering body with mental joy, than seventy of such health and such existence. I would not change!"

But though Florence could not summon sufficient courage to remain while the interview lasted, suspense became so intolerable that she felt as if the most dreaded reality could be better borne. Hardly knowing her own intentions, she waited in a little sitting-room below, till they descended; then springing forward, she caught hold

of Sir Charles's hand, and looked up in his face with cheeks and lips perfectly blanched, and every effort to speak died away in indistinct murmurs. Only too well accustomed to such painful scenes, the physician gently led her within the parlor and closed the door; the action recalled voice, and she gasped forth—

"Oh! is there not hope? will you not save him? Tell me he will not die!"

"My good young lady, life and death are not in the hands of man; yet it were cruel, unwisely cruel, to give you hope. Your brother's mind has been his poison—I dare not tell you—he may live."

"But he will linger—he may be spared us many years yet," persisted Florence, in the wild accents of one determined against belief. "It cannot be that he will go now—so young—so——but forgive me," she added, when the hysterical sobs gave way, "tell me, I am better now—I can bear it—I ought to know, for my poor mother's sake, how long we may call him ours?"

The reply was given kindly and carefully; but what language, what gentleness may soften the bitter anguish of such words? Florence heard, and yet she sank not. She bade farewell to those kind friends; she saw them go, but still she stood as if thought, sense, life itself were frozen; and then she rushed up the stairs into her own room, secured the door, and sinking on her knees buried her face in the bed-clothes, and her slight frame shook beneath its agony

Another hour, and that suffering girl was seated by her brother's couch, holding his hand in hers, and with a marble cheek, but faint sweet smile, listening to and sympathising in his lovely dreams of fame. And such is woman,—her tears are with her God, her smile with man; the heart may break, and who shall know it?

Mr. Morton had suggested a frontispiece as an improvement to his book, and Walter's every energy now turned to the composition of a picture from which the print might be engraven. He had resolved not to put his name to the publication, and therefore felt that a group entitled "The Poet's Home," could convey no identity; and he commenced his task with an ardor and enjoyment,

strangely at variance with the prostrating languor of disease Who that has watched the workings of the mind and spirit, as the human frame decays, can doubt our immortality? How can the awful creed of materialism exist with the view of that bright light of mind shining purer and brighter, with every hour that brings death nearer? Life *may* afford matter for the skeptic and the materialist to weave their fearful theories upon, though we know not how it *can;* but let such look on the approach of sure yet lingering death, and how will they retain them then?

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE POET'S HOME.—HE DIES.

"News! joyful news, Florence, I am so glad that you have come at length," was Minie Leslie's gleesome greeting to her sister, on her return from her daily duty about the middle of the month of April. "How tired you look! I do wish you would let me go for you sometimes;" and she insisted on removing Florence's bonnet and shawl, and forced her to sit down. Florence was indeed weary and dispirited, weighed down by the thought that every morning she left home might be her last to look on her brother. How little did her employers know the burden that she bore, looking on her as an inanimate, harmless girl, well suited for her daily toil, and nothing more! But weary as she was, she met Minie's fond kiss with one as fond, and a smile as sweet.

"And what is this joyous news, Minie, dear? Do not play with my curiosity too long.

"Listen, Flory, you shall have it in all the pompous language of the aristocratic Morning Post," and taking up the paper, she read in mock heroic tones—

"We are truly rejoiced to state that the Rt. Hon Edmund Baron St. Maur, and his beautiful and accomplished lady, with their suite, are confidently expected to arrive in England the first week in May: the noble Lord's health, we understand, is so perfectly re-established,

that no danger is apprehended from his permanent residence in his native country. We have heard it whispered that for his beneficial exertions in the courts of Italy and Paris, and other diplomatic services, an Earldom will be granted him, a dignity seldom so well deserved. For his lady we have only to state, that the extraordinary beauty of the Lady Ida Villiers has not yet faded from the minds of her countrymen, and that the united testimony of the Italian and French Courts would inform us, if she have lost the charms of girlhood, she has acquired others more dazzling still."

"Now, I should very much like to know who put that puff in. How Lady St. Maur would laugh at it herself! But is it not delightful she is coming home?"

Florence did not answer, she was leaning over her brother's couch, and thinking; oh, what a bright stream of thought came leaping and sparkling over her mind, carrying it back with the visions it brought. She felt her brother's arm thrown round her, and that simple action deprived her of all self-control; her head sunk on his bosom, and she burst into tears.

Minie was bewildered, her simple guilelessness could not enter into her sister's feelings, nor did Mrs. Leslie's gentle explanation succeed in convincing her that any thing like loss of fortune and a lower station could or ought to affect friendship. In vain were all her mother's representations of the customs of society; its *convenances* we should say, if a French word may be permitted. She persisted that in this case they had no weight, and ended by declaring, that if she were mistaken, and Lady St. Maur made no exertion to renew her kindness, she would take care how she loved or trusted beyond the hallowed circle of her own home.

Walter continued to work at his cherished picture as perseveringly as his waning strength allowed. It represented the interior of a cottage room well remembered by Florence, as that of her dearly loved home in Devonshire. a glow as from a brilliantly setting sun, streamed through the large French window which opened on a view of hill and wood, and distant ocean; a couch the draperies of which well harmonized with the lights and shadows of

the back ground, stood as drawn forward, that the breeze of evening might play upon its occupant, in whose languid frame, and attenuated, but most striking features, Walter had thrown the characteristic likeness of himself: close at his side, employed in arranging flowers in a vase upon a table near them, he had placed Florence; near them, on her own arm-chair, with one hand laid fondly on the rich golden hair of her younger girl, was his mother—a beautiful likeness—for the son knew so well the character of his mother, no marvel the artist could not fail. Minie's guitar was in her lap, one hand carelessly sweeping its strings, while her head was thrown back, and her beaming countenance looked up in her mother's face with her own arch mischief-loving smile. The pencil of the artist lingered on these lovely forms, as if each day that whispered his own departure nearer, bound them closer to his heart, and he sought indelibly to join his form and face with theirs, leaving them one fond enduring trace ere he passed away for ever.

May came with her sweet flowers and reviving breath; even the environs of the huge metropolis looked smiling in summer, and the air came heated with one flood of warmth and light from the cloudless sun. The season was unusually hot, and Florence, almost to her surprise, felt her daily walks far more wearisome and exhausting than they had been in the winter. With the heat, Walter's feverish restlessness increased, often bringing temporary delirium; but his fancies even then were full of poetry, and love, and hope; and in those hours of suffering, the presence of Florence seemed so to soothe him that even when his fancy wandered, he was still conscious of her presence. It was not very remarkable that her health began visibly to fail, though so great was her meek endurance, her silent energy, that still uncomplaining she struggled on, only praying that while Walter needed her care she might not fail.

And those nights, though exhausting to the frame, were often thrice blessed in their communings with a spirit so soon about to seek that blissful bourne from whence no traveller returns; when not disabled by fever, his converse was all of heaven, as if its glory and its blessedness were

already fully revealed, and as she listened to him, Florence felt as if those words were inspired to be her comfort hereafter.

"There was a time I feared to die for your sakes, my beloved ones," he said, in a one of these communings; "but my God hath been so merciful, my Florence. His spirit hath come to remove these doubts, and lead me to put my whole trust in Him, who my mother first taught me would provide. Oh! what a blessing has her religion been to me in this trial! Tell her this when I am gone; she cannot bear it now, but it will soothe her then; tell her the prayers she taught my infant lips return, when fever prevents all other, and I know that they are heard, they bring such peace."

"And have you no wish, my Walter?"

"I have no earthly wish, my Florence; my soul departs, my frame will crumble to its parent dust, but the aspirations of mind remain; my longing for the good, the beautiful, the infinite, will all be filled in heaven; and I have no wish, save to linger till my last fond task is done, and perhaps another—but it is such folly—"

"Tell it me, dear Walter."

"Let them lay me where grass and flowers may grow above me, Florence; do not let them cover my grave with the cold flag-stones that mark the city tombs—'tis an idle wish, yet it haunts me. I would rather that children's feet should press the turf, and tiny hands pluck the flowers, than stony walls surround me; and let them stamp upon the head-stone simple words, no labored epitaph, only that I felt my father loved me, and so he called me to his throne."

And Florence promised; and though her heart was full of tears, she could not weep. Many scenes of life are holy—the early morn, the twilight hour, the starry night, the rolling storm, the hymn of thousands from the sacred fane, the marriage rite, or funeral dirge; but none more holy than the chamber of the dying, lingering beside a departing spirit, seeming as if already the angel shone above the mortal, waiting but the eternal summons to wing his flight on high.

One evening Walter's couch had been drawn near the

open casement, which looked into the garden at the back of the house; and even the dusty green and scentless flowers, peculiar to the environs of London, were grateful to the poet. He was propped up with pillows, and his hand was yet busy on the canvas, giving the last touches to his picture.

All was completed but the figure of Minie, who was sitting in the required attitude; but it was well he had not waited till that moment to give the joyous expression he so much loved.

An hour passed, and no movement, no sound disturbed that little party: the hand of the artist moved languidly, but still it moved, and the concluding touches started into life beneath it. Sometimes his eyes would close, and then after a brief interval of rest, re-open to look upon his task.

Florence had not yet returned, having gone out of her way to purchase some fresh flowers, as was her custom every third day, in spite of Walter's remonstrances: the intense delight which they always gave him was too visible to permit any cessation of the indulgence: that she deprived herself of many little necessaries, and, exhausted and weary, never rode to her pupils, that she might save to purchase luxuries for him, he never knew. She often recalled Emily Melford's horror of exertion, and half smiled at the widely different meanings that word bore in their respective vocabularies: but a bitter feeling mingled with the smile at her own credulity in Emily's profession of interest and regard; from the day she had sought her to the present moment, a full year, she had rested as silent and indifferent as before.

As Florence came within sight of the bay windows of her house, she fancied that she could distinguish the figure of Walter, looking down the road, as if watching her return. She was surprised, because, since his increasing illness, they had changed their apartment from the front to the back sitting-room, in order to give him more quiet and fresh air than the dusty road afforded. What he could be doing there she could not conceive, for even if he were anxious for her return and wished to watch for her, he surely had not sufficient strength to walk from one room to another, and there remain standing so that she

could distinguish his full figure. Hope flashed on her heart that he was better. Some extraordinary change must have taken place, and he might yet live! Oh, what a sudden thrill came with that fond thought! and she hurried, almost ran the intervening space. Breathless she entered the house, and sprang up the staircase.

"What, settled again so soon at your drawing, dearest Walter, and only a minute ago I saw you beckoning me from the next room—how could you stand there so long?"

Mrs. Leslie put her finger on her lips—"You have been strangely deceived, my love, Walter has not quitted this room nor this posture for some hours. Come softly, I think he sleeps."

No word, no cry passed the lips of Florence, although a pang, sharp as if every drop of blood were turned to ice, curdled through her frame. She knew she was not deceived. As surely as she now looked on him, she felt she had seen him smile, as if to bid her hasten home, not ten minutes before, and with a fleet and noiseless step she stood beside him. The pencil was still within his hand, but it moved no longer on the canvas—the eyes were closed, the lips were parted: she bent down her head and pressed her lips upon his brow—it was marbly cold.

"Walter!" she shrieked, for in that dread moment she knew not what she did. "Walter—my brother—speak to me—look on me again!"

For a moment she stood as if waiting for the look, the voice she called; then, pressing her hands wildly to her brow, sought to collect thought, energy, control, for her poor mother's sake—but all, all failed—and for the first time in her life, she sunk down in a deep and deathlike swoon.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RETURN TO ENGLAND.—A HAPPY WIFE.—THE FAMILY MEETING.

THAT same evening, nay the same hour, which shook from its mourning pinions such heavy sorrow on that

lowly home, came radiant with sunshine and glee, and the voice of mirth and song and welcome, to Lord Edgemere's stately mansion in St. James's.

Lord and Lady St. Maur had that day arrived in England, and Lord Edgemere, with his usual hospitality, had invited every relative or connection on either side, to give them welcome. There were very many to whom Lord and Lady St. Maur had to be introduced, for births and marriages had multiplied the circle; nor were their own three lovely children less objects of attraction than themselves.

Surely if there be real joy on earth, it is found in the hour of meeting—alloy, indeed, it must have, for few are the hearts on whom five years may pass and leave no trace; but to Lady St. Maur it was perfect as earth can make it. She had left England anxious and sorrowing; not knowing even if the beloved one, to whom she had pledged her maiden heart, might even then be spared to claim her as his own.

She returned a happy wife, a doting mother—not a death had snatched away one whom she had left behind, and the hour of meeting was not one to call up the cold doubt and dark mistrust as to the permanence and truth of the professions which it elicited. Single-hearted, truthful, the very child of nature herself, Lady St. Maur felt only happiness, rejoicing in seeing again around her familiar faces, and yet more familiar things. The very pride, the very coldness for which she had been so often blamed, when her engagement had been the theme of every tongue, were now no longer visible; and some there were who could scarcely have recognised in the Baroness St. Maur the Lady Ida Villiers of former years.

"So, I am to be one of the family, though claiming not the tenth part of a Scotch cousinship with any one here present," was the bluff greeting of Sir Charles Brashleigh, as he entered. "Lord Edgemere, you are always kind, but to-night kinder than ever. Where's the rebel whom I exiled five years ago? Baron St. Maur, stand forth! Hey, what, do you mean to impose yourself on me for my patient, young man? Pshaw! you are in far too good condition for me to claim acquaintance with

you," he continued, laughing, as Lord St. Maur, his mother, and wife hastened from their respective circles and crowded round him.

"Indeed, Sir Charles, instead of rebellious, I claim a reward for submission, patience, and a whole host of saintly virtues," was the joyous reply. "Here have I been perfectly well for three full years, and yet in simple obedience to your command, remained in Italy, when my whole heart was in my own country."

"Ida is extremely obliged to you, Edmund," mischievously interposed Alfred Melford. "So much so;" said Lady Ida, "that I will expose him. Sir Charles, give him no particle of credit for obedience; he has been quite as impatient, and rebellious, and disloyal as you can possibly fancy: it is only to me and Lady Helen that your praise is in any way due."

"Is it so, fair lady? Your lord does look somewhat guilty, I must confess. However, as he has brought me back some pound or two more of flesh, and a proper shade of color, we will be merciful, and pronounce that, voluntarily or not, he has kept the term of exile well. Lady Helen, Italy has been the elixir of life to you. If I want to grow young, I will go there too. Lady St. Maur, by the way, I believe six or seven years ago you and I were sworn foes; are we friends now? Now, do not look so prettily bewildered; there was a time when a fair girl wanted to marry a dying man, and sacrifice her bloom and her joy in nursing him, and I, like a monster of cruelty, placed my ban upon it, and under Providence saved both. Am I forgiven? I do not think we ever shook hands at parting."

"Now I will return good for evil, Sir Charles, and pray you to forgive her," answered her husband fondly, as Lady St. Maur placed both hands in those of Sir Charles, and looked up in his face without speaking, save through her glistening eyes.

"If you knew how often she has repented her injustice, and spoken of your skill, as, under Heaven, the author of her joy."

"There then is the kiss of peace," replied Sir Charles,

suiting the action to the word, and bending his lips to her brow, adding joyously, "You are a happy fellow, Edmund! but where are your children? Ah! Lady Helen is bringing them. How strange that grandmammas think of those things more than mammas!" And after playfully caressing them he continued, "Lady St. Maur, as your husband left his heart in England, though you were by his side, has the *dolce far niente*, of Italy, retained any part of yours?"

"Not the hundreth part of a particle, Sir Charles. I have been too happy not to love Italy; but give me England for a home."

"Well, if I could be transported to Italy without any trouble, its *dolce far niente* must be heaven upon earth." said Emily Melford, so gravely, and with so deep a sigh, as to cause a burst of laughter round her. Sir Charles Brashleigh singled her out on the instant, and greeted her by a mock heroic bow.

"The honorable Miss Emily Melford absolutely transplanted from the blue and buff *chaise longue* of Belgrave Square! Young lady, I give you all the joy you will take the trouble to receive. What miracle has wrought this change?"

Lady St. Maur looked at him, surprised, and going to the sofa where her cousin sat, put her arm affectionately round her.

"Not very wonderful, Sir Charles, considering Emily has not seen me so long. I find nothing very remarkable about her except——"

"Except that she is looking better and stouter than when you left," interrupted the physician slyly.

"Sir Charles, good looks are not always the criterion of good health," answered Emily, pettishly. "That you do not consider me worthy of your attention, is no proof I do not require medical care—you will do nothing for me."

"Because my good young lady, you can do more for yourself, and I never take fees where I cannot cure. As for the *dolce far niente* of Italy, you need not go so far to find it, for I rather believe it is discoverable in a certain boudoir in Belgrave-square."

"Emily, how can you let Sir Charles laugh at you in this manner?" exclaimed her brother; "I would rather go work six hours in every twelve."

"Do you not know, Frederick, Emily is proverbially good natured, and would not interrupt any body's amusement, even at her own expense?"

"You should rather admire than blame me, Mary:"

"So I do, my dear! I like everybody to be happy in their own way."

"Happy! Do you mean to tell me I am happy, Mary?"

"Indeed, I know no person who ought to be happier than yourself, Emily. My dear Ida, you look as if you did not understand this at all—you will learn all in time."

"I hope I shall, Mary," she replied, laughing; "but what is the matter with Emily, and why is she the universal object of attack?"

"Because nobody chooses to believe I am ill, Ida; but never mind me for the present!"

Lady St. Maur looked earnestly at her cousin; and that look recalled former years, when, in spite of many follies, Emily would have shrunk with horror from the selfishness, the indolence, of which she had now become the unresisting victim.

"What can keep Frank Howard so late?" observed Lord Edgemere, as a pause in the conversation around him permitted the remark. "Henry, did you tell him we expected him?"

His son replied in the affirmative, and Lord St. Maur inquired—

"By the way, Frank is in the house, is he not? Has he distinguished himself?"

'Truly, yes; an eloquent impassioned youngster, I understand, who carries all along with him."

"I am glad of it, he is so peculiarly situated from the misanthropy and cold selfishness of his father, that I have quite felt for him. It is hard upon a young man to have no friend, no relative interested in his public career."

"Friends, St, Maur! why he has gained as many as Lord Glenvylle's strange conduct lost."

"Is Glenvylle still as complete a cynic as he was in Paris?"

"If possible, more so; he seems to hold converse with none but his steward, except when he takes the fancy of holding a solemn dinner, which defend me from ever attending again."

"And can any one explain the mystery about nim; who was he?"

"In his youth, I believe, merely a private gentleman's son, and a great spendthrift, squandering money, and I fancy reputation, on the continent, till he became a disgrace to his name, and his father nearly ruined himself in changing it."

"How does he treat his son, kindly?"

"I really cannot tell; but I fancy, capriciously; sometimes a father, sometimes a tyrant, according to his mood. Frank does not want for money, or any of the appurtenances of his station, though Glenvylle is mean and miserly to himself, and as for uttering one word regarding his father, except in terms of the deepest respect, I believe he would rather die. Where Frank's warmth of heart and ingenuousness sprang from, I cannot fancy."

"Perhaps from his mother. Who was she?"

"One of the Duke of Beaumont's daughters; she died soon after Frank's birth. People have whispered of a broken heart, from discoveries made by her husband when he was under the temporary delirium of fever."

Unwilling to make this conversation general, Lord St. Maur turned it into a more desultory channel; and not long afterwards, young Howard made his appearance, even more animated than usual.

"I suppose, Master Frank, as you saw us two years ago in Rome, you have made no manner of exertion to welcome us to England? I am half inclined not to speak to you," said Lady St. Maur, sportively, as after warmly greeting her husband, he eagerly advanced towards her. "You have not the shadow of an excuse; the House does not meet to-night; and even if it did, we arrived here early enough for you to have greeted us five hours ago. Do you deserve my mercy?"

"I will bear any sentence your ladyship may pronounce,"

replied the young man gayly, "if on hearing my tale you still deem it deserved. I would not gratify myself by seeing you, till I could bring my sovereign's greetings in addition to my own. I have been in and out the Herald's office the whole day, to the no small annoyance of its worthy functionaries; and only now obtained what I wanted. Here, Melford, read out for the good of the public," he added joyously, throwing the Gazette into Alfred Melford's outstretched hand; "and to you, my Lord," he said, giving a large sealed packet to Lord St. Maur, "my office is to present this. Never say that her Majesty knows not how to discern merit and reward it, but cry God bless the Queen, and long life to the Earl and Countess St. Maur."

CHAPTER XXVI.

EXCUSES FOR INDOLENCE.—THE FRIEND SEEKS HER FRIEND.

For several weeks a complete whirl of gayety absorbed the time of the newly-created Earl and Countess. It was not only the very height of the London season, when levees and drawing-rooms continually recurring compelled their attendance, but their long absence from England occasioned a wider round of visiting than was customary even to the gayest of the aristocracy. Friends, relatives, family connections, all poured in upon them with hospitality and proffered kindness; and yet with all this the Earl found time to attend not only to his new office in the royal cabinet, but to literary pursuits, and yet have his children with him for two or three hours in the day as usual; and Lady St. Maur found leisure to read, as was her invariable custom, with her husband—that is to say, to read what he read, to make extracts from black-lettered folios, if he had not time, and withal attend to her children; delighting in giving her little girls those first instructions which many mothers leave to hirelings. She had time too to enter into the interests of all her friends, to

perceive with real regret the state of nervous irritability into which Emily Melford had fallen; and more, still to think of and long to know something certain concerning the young girl who had so interested her just before she had quitted England. The belief that Florence did not write that extraordinary letter, and that in consequence she had some secret enemy, had gained such powerful influence over Lady St. Maur's mind, that, though never spoken, she could not shake it off. But how to obtain this information? In the midst of her gayeties, her domestic pleasures, her many claims, still she found herself repeatedly thinking of Florence, and turning over every scheme, practicable or impracticable, for discovering her, without, however, any prospect of success; till one morning, about two months after her arrival in England, Alfred Melford casually mentioned his having seen her former favorite Florence Leslie, the year previously, but so altered!

"Altered;" repeated Lady St. Maur; "if you could only find her for me, Alfred, I should be very grateful."

"I wish I could, cousin mine; but I do not know how. I am sure she needed friends, poor girl! and Emily might have served her, if she had not thought so much of trouble."

"I really do not know what you mean, Alfred," replied his sister, languidly. "Would you have had me go about inquiring who among my friends wanted a governess, for one of whom, after all, I know so little?"

"A governess!" repeated the Countess, in painful surprise. "Emily, why did you not tell me this? I have more than once asked you lately if you knew any thing of her, and you have always answered in the negative."

"Because I do not know any thing of her now; it is ages ago since she called at our house to know if *we* would recommend her, as she was obliged to teach; and of course I thought you must know that."

"Know it! how?"

"Why, did she not correspond with you?"

"I told you I had not heard from her for some time; she never answered my letter to her on her father's death."

"Because she never received it," interposed Alfred

"Emily carelessly mislaid it for so long, that when it was found she destroyed it as useless. I advised her to tell you, which of course she never did. And would you believe it? she heard of a situation which would exactly have suited poor Florence, and which the simple exertion of taking a ten minutes' drive would have secured her, and yet she would not make the exertion to obtain it."

"Well, what can it signify; she has a situation, and what more could I have done for her? I told her I should be glad to see her whenever she liked to come; and as she never has come, I suppose she does not care enough about us."

"Nonsense, Emily! very likely a girl of Miss Leslie's sensitiveness should come forward to seek our acquaintance, with such an indefinite invitation!" angrily responded Melford.

"You have a wonderful knowledge of Miss Leslie's character, Alfred;" retorted Emily, maliciously. "Any one would suppose her pale face and pensive smile had made an extraordinary impression."

"Emily, you are a fool!" he began, but, softened by the Countess's beseeching "Alfred!" added more quietly—"A face paled by evident anxiety and suffering, and a smile so changed from its joyousness, could not fail of making an impression."

"Is she indeed so altered?" inquired Lady St. Maur. "But do you know why she was obliged to go out? I knew Mr. Leslie was not rich, but I fancied his children provided for."

"So perhaps they might have been, but I believe some unfortunate lawsuit, which Mr. Leslie did not live to complete, ruined them; but I must go. I wish you could convince Emily that, however she may think indolence no sin in itself, it, occasions the commission of too many to be disregarded; and there is the first moral axiom my giddy brain ever threw into words. Fearing my next speech should counteract it, good-by."

"He is exceedingly annoying; I wonder what has come over him?" observed his sister on his departure. "Any one would think he was turning saint."

"Why? because he happened to say the truth? Alfred

has excellent feelings and high religious principles, though, happily for himself, he can conceal them from those who would laugh him out of them."

"Do you mean to say that he is right, then? I often console myself with the idea, that by not going out I escape from those fashionable follies which so many make the sum of their existence."

"You have tried the school of comparative solitude for the last two years, my dear Emily; but tell me, are you the same happy, mirthful being you were when I left England?"

For a few minutes Emily paused, touched by Ida's affectionate tone, and then with a sudden burst of natural feeling, she exclaimed—

"Ida, I will answer you, for I believe you are my truest friend; and perhaps if you had never left me, I should scarcely have sunk so low as I am now. I am miserable. I feel chained down by a dead weight which I cannot cast aside. I have no energy, no power, and must remain a useless burden for the remainder of my days."

"Do not say so, Emily; but tell me what first induced you to fly the world."

"Oh! it is not worth your hearing. Do you remember my telling you I meant to throw off all restraint, from having had thirteen years of school discipline, and seek only my own pleasure? I see you do, and also your own prophetic answer—for literally I am one of the most disagreeable, selfish beings in the universe. Well, I adhered to my words—I read nothing but the lightest and most frivolous novels; did nothing but make and receive visits. I thought the weeks horribly long, and insufferably dull, if one night passed without a party. I danced, flirted, waltzed, with little cessation through the season. I had many disagreeable entanglements, but still there was excitement in getting out of them; and then I fancied that I loved three or four times, and one, the last, heigho! if he had but been rich, I might have been a different being; for the poor fellow did love me, and I did not treat him well—but that has little to do with my story. I mingled only with the heartless, the cold, the worldly; all that appeared good I believed to be hypocrisy. I do not

know now what stopped me in this headlong career; perhaps it was hearing that the—the—young man to whom I referred just now, and whom my coquetry and ill-usage had compelled to exchange his regiment for one going to India, was drowned on his passage; but I awoke as from a hideous dream—all my past excitement looked like grinning shadows. I seemed to be standing on a precipice, overhanging a gulf of perdition, into which but one step more would plunge me everlastingly, and I shuddered and turned back! but with a shock so violent that I inwardly vowed never to enter such scenes again. Of course the fever of excitement ended in bodily exhaustion, and its horrible void; for I was never very strong, and then I imagined myself ill, and it was a good excuse for changing my mode of life, and so I encouraged it till I really had no power to do otherwise. And now you know my whole story, and you must see that I have more excuse for indolence and solitude than most people have."

"You have indeed told me a sad story, Emily; but I cannot come to the same conclusion. Why, to escape from faults of commission, do you run headlong into those of omission and neglect? Why not rather seek better and nobler sources of enjoyment and exertion?"

"Where can I find them? I do think unmarried women the most useless, miserable beings in existence! they have no call for exertion, nothing to interest them."

"Have you lost all the power of affection, Emily?"

"My dear Ida, surely now you do not speak with your usual wisdom. What can mamma or papa want with me? what can I do for them, or even feel for them, to fill up this craving void? And as for Georgiana, really she would laugh at the idea of my requiring her affection, or feeling any for her. Friend! there is no such thing in the London world."

"For heaven's sake, my dear Emily, do not make such sweeping assertions. If you are bereft of common feeling, of course my arguments can have little weight; but you might have made a friend—Florence."

"Do not speak of Florence, Ida—I would not have Alfred know it because he torments me quite enough; but

I will tell you that her note, though it simply thanked my intended kindness, and said she no longer needed it, caused such painful feelings that I destroyed it, for I could not bear to think of, or look at it."

"And you have no remembrance at all of her address?"

"No; but I think I kept the name and address of the lady with whom she said she was going to reside; for while the stinging self-reproach lasted, I thought if I heard of any thing more advantageous I would write to her; but that idea of course only lasted till conscience was silenced, two days afterwards. How you, with all your new interests and affections, can have still time and inclination to bestow a thought on one whom you knew so short a time, I cannot understand; you certainly are an extraordinary person. I wish I were more like you, but I was not so constituted; I cannot help my nature."

How many there are in the world like Emily Melford, who never fail to drown the still small voice of conscience by the consoling reflection, it is not themselves but their constitution at fault; that they cannot help themselves, and therefore make no exertion so to do.

For a wonder, Emily kept her promise. The following morning came Mrs. Russel's direction, and the Countess wrote immediately, requesting to know if a young lady of the name of Florence Leslie still resided with Mrs. Russel, as governess; or if she had left, she would feel really obliged for any information concerning her which Mrs. Russel could bestow.

CHAPTER XXVII.

TO PROVE INNOCENCE AND RELIEVE SUFFERING IS NOT A NEEDLESS EXERTION.

SEVERAL days elapsed before Lady St. Maur received any answer to her note, and when the reply did come, it contained little satisfactory.

"Mrs. Russel's compliments to the Countess St. Maur,

and begs to inform her ladyship that a young person of the name of Florence Leslie did reside with her a few months, as governess; but having discovered she had been grossly deceived, and that the person in question was very unfit for such a responsible situation, Mrs. Russel was compelled to dismiss her directly, and knows nothing more concerning her or her family."

This was such a strong confirmation of previous reports, that Lady St. Maur's secret hopes fell; yet still she was not satisfied, and while sitting in painful perplexity, Lady Mary Villiers and Alfred Melford chanced to call in. "What is the matter, Ida? Anxiety in the Upper House, yclept the nursery? Any of the ladies or lords there not as well as their mamma thinks they ought to be?" was the former's lively greeting, which the Countess answered by putting Mrs. Russel's note in her hand, adding with a smile, "I am not at all the fanciful mamma you would make me, Mary; my children are all well, and I value the blessing rather too thankfully to alloy it by imagining them otherwise without just cause."

"And yet you worry yourself about such a trifle as this. My dear Ida, I shall hate the very name of Florence Leslie, if it is to annoy you in this manner! What can she be to you that you cannot dismiss her from your mind, believing her, as everybody else does, no longer worthy of your regard? This note does but confirm what you already know."

"What can you possibly mean?" exclaimed Melford indignantly. "Florence Leslie unworthy of Ida's regard? She is no more unworthy of it than I am, if as much What can you mean?"

They told him, but he was only the more indignant. "It is all some specious lie—I beg your pardon, Ida, for the word—I have seen Miss Leslie later than either of you, and I would stake my reputation that no more sin or shame lies on that heart than on either of those I have the honor of now addressing. Go yourself to this Mrs. Russel, Ida; I dare say she has invented this tale to excuse her dismissal of poor Florence, because she was too good for her."

"Strange then it should so exactly agree with the previous rumors," replied Lady Mary, who, without any malice or envy, had yet some secret jealously that such an unknown person should have any part of her friend's interest or regard. "What good can Ida's taking so much trouble do, except to annoy her yet more?"

"Lady Mary, you are too prejudiced for me. My cousin Ida will not give up this poor girl without sufficient cause. Go to Mrs. Russel, Ida, make her tell you more particulars; or if you do not like to do so, authorize me, and I will get out the truth, you may depend."

"Thank you, my good cousin, but I will go myself. My dear Mary, do not look so much annoyed; you know I told you, years ago, if I found Florence worthy of my regard she should have it still."

"But she is not worthy, and that is what annoys me."

"How do I know that she is not? Rumor never weighs a breath with me; I must have positive proofs of guilt before I will believe it, and I care not what trouble it costs to discover the truth. Still not satisfied, Mary? You cannot be so altered as to envy that poor friendless girl the trifling happiness of my unchanged regard."

"I know I am very selfish, dearest Ida, but you must forgive me; I value your love so highly that I cannot bear to see it unworthily bestowed," said Lady Mary frankly, kissing the Countess affectionately as she spoke; "and, after hearing what we have heard, I think——"

"You think I might just as well be satisfied with the friends I have, and not seek others; is it not so? And so leave poor Florence to her fate, innocent or guilty. Such is not quite my idea of woman's friendship. No, Mary, to prove innocence and relieve suffering can never be the needless exertion you wish me to suppose it."

Still Lady Mary was not quite convinced. In fact, Alfred Melford was the only one who gave the Countess encouragement in her benevolence. The Earl himself, and Lady Helen, though generally the last to entertain any thing approaching to prejudice, still imagined the fancy of two persons having names so exactly similar, and moving in the same scenes, much too romantic to be entertained a moment. They did not indeed say

much; but what is there more painfully chilling than to read doubt and want of sympathy in those whose approval we long for, as robing our cherished plans with an importance which of themselves they never can attain.

It so happened, just about this time, that in inquiring amongst various jewellers for a rare stone, to replace one which had fallen from Lady St. Maur's bracelet, Alice had perceived, and instantly recognised the identical clasp and chain which her lady had presented to Miss Leslie. Knowing how anxious the Countess was to discover some trace of Florence, she asked many questions as to how and where that trinket had been obtained. Mr. Danvers could tell her little, except that he had purchased it some months ago of a young lady who was in mourning, and wore so thick a veil that he could not even discern her countenance; but, by the tone of her voice, he was sure she was a lady. Lady St. Maur without hesitation repurchased it, satisfying herself it was the identical jewel by touching the spring (of whose existence the jeweller was unconscious) and the letters I. V. to F. L. were still distinctly visible, but the braid of hair was gone.

Lady Mary was indignant that Florence could ever have sold the trinket; she could not imagine any distress so great as to demand such a sacrifice, and if she really were so distressed, why did she not do as Ida had desired her, write and ask her promised influence; that she did not was a still stronger proof of her unworthiness. Besides, how could they be sure that it was not individual imprudence instead of family distress which had compelled its sale? The Earl and Lady Helen said nothing; but Ida felt that their opinions sided with Lady Mary's, and though her own heart still defended Florence, she half shrunk from pursuing her inquiries, lest the truth should indeed be such as to demand the relinquishing of all her generous plans and kindly feelings. Alfred Melford, however, persisted in his assertion of Florence's entire innocence, and the visit to Mrs. Russel, which he so urgently advised, was in consequence no longer deferred.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ALFRED MELFORD EXERTS HIMSELF.—LADY MARY ALTERS HER OPINION.—THE UNKNOWN MUSICIAN.

"WELL, what news, fair cousin?" exclaimed young Melford, galloping up to Lady St. Maur's carriage, half way between Norwood and London, and checking his horse to a speaking pace.

"Bad!" replied Lady Mary, mischievously. "Ida has only had reports confirmed."

"Of course, that I expected from Mrs. Russel's note, but are *you* satisfied, Ida?"

"Not at all, I am as far from the truth as ever; except that Florence positively denied the charge."

"Hurrah then, victory!" exclaimed Melford, joyously. 'And Mrs. Russel—"

"Is much too prejudiced a person for her assertion to have any weight, even I acknowledge," said Lady Mary, frankly.

"But what did she say?"

"Only what we already know," replied the Countess. "She went on a visit to her friends in Hampshire, was of course questioned as to her new governess, heard all the reports, and without deigning a single question as to whether or not Florence was the person supposed, dismissed her on the instant. Of course her story to me was very precise, and very plausible; but I give you its interpretation."

"Have you any clue to Miss Leslie's present residence?"

"I fear none. Mrs. Russel thought she lived at Peckham or Camberwell, but could not pretend to say; the less she had to do with such a person, she thought, the better."

"I will find her, if I call at every house in both those places," muttered Melford.

"To prove her innocence, or deny my penetration a triumph, Mr. Melford?" demanded Lady Mary, archly.

"To prove," he replied, so gravely, almost reproachfully, that Lady Mary felt unconsciously rebuked, "how

much more kindly and justly woman is judged by man than by her own sex."

'You forget Ida and the Earl," replied Lady Mary rallying.

"Ida is incapable of so petty a feeling as prejudice. Even if she had not known Florence, her judgment would be the same as it is now. The Earl never knew Miss Leslie, and is annoyed that the very shadow of a doubt should rest on any one in whom his wife is interested."

"You are a barrister, Mr. Melford, and will of course make your client's cause good," answered Lady Mary, jestingly, but if the truth must be written, she was not quite pleased, having just that sort of lurking inclination towards young Melford which made her feel annoyed that any other woman should so occupy his thoughts.

Melford kept his word. Every hour he could snatch from his studies he devoted to his cousin's service, and at length succeeded in discovering the lodging at Camberwell which Mrs. Leslie had occupied, but to his great disappointment, it was then untenanted. From the landlady, however, he heard much to deepen his interest in the search. Mrs. Everett had become so attached to her lodgers, that with the garrulity of her class, she poured forth all they had encountered from sickness and privation; and how the young ladies had worked to pay her rent, and prevent bills running on; and how the young gentleman had painted the beautifullest pictures, and wrote such fine poetry, that she used to listen and listen, and the words were so grandlike, yet so simple, they made her feel as her Bible did. "Poor young gentleman," she continued, "he was almost an angel before he died; and I am sure he is one now!" and she put her apron to her eyes.

"Died!" repeated young Melford. "Has there been a death lately in the family, then?"

"Bless your kind heart, yes sir; and that was for why the poor lady, his mother, and her daughter left me Natural like, they could not bear to remain where everything reminded them of him; for I never saw such love as existed between 'em all. I am sure the poor young man killed himself. Why bless you, he used at one time

to sit up half the night writing those fine poems; and then he got ill. Miss Leslie was out as a governess then, and never knew how ill her poor brother was till he was a little better, and she came home suddenly, and when she got a little over her own misfortunes—for between you and me, sir, I think that good-for-nothing hard woman with whom she had lived had said something very shameful about her character, almost taking it from her, when, bless you, she was innocent as a lamb, so good and religious, and devoted to her family. She could no more have acted as they said she did than I could, and it was so cruel to say she was a bad girl, and so deprive her of bread."

"I knew it was a lie;" Melford burst forth at this point, to Mrs. Everett's great surprise.

"La, sir! you startle me. Howsomdever, perhaps it was all the happier for her to be at home, when her poor brother was so weak and ill; but she used to go and teach every day nearly two miles off, trudged through hail and rain, cold and snow, when she would shake again from weakness, and perhaps sitting up the greater part of the night; and when I have begged her not, she used to say, with such a sweet smile, it made my heart ache—"Who is to pay your rent, dear Mrs. Everett, if I do not work; and how can we be unjust to you, when you are so kind?"

"But she had a sister, had she not?" here interposed Melford; "did she do nothing?"

"Nothing! bless you sir, she worked at her needle as hard as any of them; but she was too young, too pretty to go out as Miss Florence did; she wanted to do it, and cried often enough that she was not like other girls. Ah, sir, Mr. Leslie was quite right; though she was too pretty to go out alone, or be dependent, you never saw such a lovely face, or heard such a voice—it was like an angel's. I have come and listened to her singing on a Sunday night, and felt myself in heaven; for then she only sung words from the Bible, but such beautiful solemn tunes; and to have seen how her mother and sister and Mr. Walter listened and looked at her, it would have been a good lesson to some families who don't know what family love is. Ah, sir, it is very, very hard when gentlefolks

like them become so poor, and obliged to work like slaves much harder than for folks in my station. We are born to it, and can work without feeling it. Well, sir, the poor young gentleman wrote and wrote, and painted even when he could not walk, and at last finished a book, which natural like, he wanted printed. Oh, sir, how his poor sister worked to gratify him; up earlier than ever, often out almost before the light, and not home till so late, and at last she got a gentleman to agree, and pay nearly all the expenses; and what do you think she did to make up the money? why, without telling him, sold all her jewels. She had not many; but one she loved so much, a beautiful cross and chain some dear friend had given her, and oh! how cut up she was in parting with it; but she did not hesitate, for she never thought of herself or her own sufferings, and so it was sold; and after all, her poor brother is gone to a better world, and what will the book be to him?"

"And how along ago was this?" inquired Melford.

"Some time last May, sir; but poor Miss Leslie knew he must die weeks before. Oh! what an hour that was! but she bore up for her brother's sake, and her poor mother's, and only sank when he did not need her any more. I thought she would have never recovered from the swoon she had when she came home, and found he was dead—had died, sir, in the very act of finishing a beautiful picture. She was very, very ill, and I think that kept poor Mrs. Leslie up; but I fear me she will not last long, and those two poor young ladies will be left without a single friend." And the good woman actually sobbed.

Melford respected the feeling, and so kindly assured her that they had friends, that he had, in fact, come on the part of one most anxious to discover them, that she soon recovered herself.

"Bless you, sir, for such good news! Well, as soon as poor Miss Leslie could be moved, they went to an old relation somewhere in Berkshire; and Miss Minie, sweet soul! wrote to me often to tell me how her poor sister was, and grieving that they must change their lodgings. I havn't heard where they are now; for Miss Minie wrote the last time all in the bustle of moving and settling, a

forgot to put the direction, but said she would come and see me very soon. And, bless your heart, sir, she will be sure to come, for she is a true lady, as they all are; not a bit of pride about 'em."

Alfred Mulford was an eloquent narrator; and so simply and touchingly did he repeat Mrs. Everett's communications, that not one of his auditors, even the prejudiced Lady Mary, or the stagnant Emily, could listen to him unmoved.

"Ida, dearest Ida! I have indeed been too prejudiced; but I know if you find this poor girl you will forgive me, and let me aid your labor of kindness," exclaimed Lady Mary, warmly, as she knelt down playfully on the cushion at the Countess's feet. "What are you thinking about so sorrowfully? We shall find her, depend upon it."

"I was thinking, Mary, why she should never have written to me in her brother's behalf; her own sufferings I know she would never have revealed. But why she should never have appealed to my promised influence, for him whom it might have so beneficially served, perplexes me more than ever."

"Her letter may have been lost, miscarried, or even changed."

"Changed!" repeated Lady St. Maur, eagerly interrupting him. "Alfred, if such a thing were really possible, you have given me the clue to all the apparent mystery of Florence's conduct. You not only aid me by active service, but by your ready judgment; how can I thank you?"

"Do not thank me at all, cousin mine," he answered, laughing; "thank your own persevering benevolence, without which, this poor girl must ever have remained a victim to these lying reports. Frank Howard, most honorable member! I hope your exertions last night have not robbed you of eloquence this morning," he continued, gayly, as young Howard and Sir Charles Brashleigh, at that moment entered. "What senatorial mission can bring you here?"

"Surely I may pay my homage to the Countess St. Maur as well as yourself?" replied the young man, in the same tone.

"I did not know that you had time to spare for such frivolity, my eloquent friend; and now I believe, in spite of that chivalric speech, your business is more with the Earl than with Ida."

"You are quite mistaken, for I parted with the Earl not half an hour ago, at Morton's, the publisher, where you should have been with me, Melford."

"To look over some musty pamphlets of parliamentary debates, of the time of Caractacus? Not I; I have enough to do with Blackstone."

"No," replied Howard, laughing. "I was waiting in Morton's private parlor till he should be disengaged, when I heard some one singing in the adjoining room; I never heard any thing so beautiful in my life! It was that sublime air of Handel's—'Comfort ye my people,' poured forth with such liquid sweetness, such thrilling power, it held me entranced as if my very breath were chained. It ceased at length, to my great grief, and was followed by one of Morton's daughters taking her lesson, filling me with astonishment who this gifted instructress could be. Morton came at length, full of apology at the delay; and looking most mysteriously annoyed when I told him if that delicious music had continued, I would willingly have waited all day. At last he owned the cause of his vexation. It appears that the singer is a very young and most beautiful girl, compelled thus to seek her livelihood; that her mother and sister have done all they could to prevent her going out, but the necessity becoming imperative, Morton obtained her pupils in a few quiet families, on whom he thought he could depend. She has, however, already excited notice and adulation; some frivolous idlers watch her in and out, and beset her with heartless and cruel attentions. Morton has stopped this as much as he can; but he cannot always be near her, and she has unhappily neither father nor brother to protect her."

"Poor girl! and who is she?" inquired Lady St. Maur, who had been conversing with Sir Charles, but attracted by Howard's tale, had paused to listen.

"I cannot tell you! for Morton seemed so annoyed, that I promised him I would not ask any thing more about her."

or even mention what I had heard, except to those likely to assist him in his benevolence rather than to annoy its object."

"And you refused to see her, satisfied only to hear? Frank, you have more forbearance than I have," exclaimed Melford; "and not even to ask her name! Have you heard this paragon, Sir Charles? Morton is patronized by you; perhaps you can tell us who she is?"

"I have a very bad memory for names, Melford, as you know," replied the old physician musingly; "but I believe this beautiful girl is the sister of a young poet, in whom Morton has been deeply interested lately. Poor fellow! I was quite shocked to hear that he died two or three months ago. I knew he could not live, for his heart was broken; but I did not think it would have been so soon."

"This is worse and worse, Sir Charles," said Lady Mary; "here you are giving a most interesting addition to Frank's adventure, and mystifying us as much as he did. Did you attend him?"

"I saw him but once, for I could do him no good. Poverty had compelled a drudgery wholly at variance with either health or inclination; and his rich gifts lay upon his mind and crushed him. In all my practice I never saw such devoted attachment to each other in the members of one family as in—"

"Was his name Leslie?" exclaimed Melford, bounding over chairs and tables till he reached Sir Charles's side, and speaking in a tone that completely electrified his hearers. "It must be, I am sure it is—a poet!—a thrilling voice!—why here is the very commentary of Mrs. Everett's tale. How blind and deaf I was not to trace it before! Sir Charles, in pity speak! was not the name Leslie? and did you not go to Camberwell? and was not one of the poet's sisters named Florence? and—"

"My good fellow, if you take away my breath in this manner, you will get no answer at all. I recollect now, it *was* Leslie, and there was a Florence too. Why, Lady St. Maur, you look as relieved as this mad boy; do explain."

But till Melford's noisy joy was over, all attempt at explanation was vain. And before the conversation could be connectedly resumed, Lord St. Maur entered the room.

"I have news for you, Ida," he said, "Morton has been telling me such a tale of affliction and genius and worth, that I only wish we had known it before. You are right, as in matters of feeling you always are, and we have all been harsh and wrong; but you know it already," he added, half-disappointed, as he met her animated glance.

"Not all, dearest Edmund; only tell me, will you blame my anxiety now?"

"No, my own kind love; but let me eat my luncheon, for, unromantic as it is, I am very hungry; and we will compare notes meanwile. On one point you may be quite easy, I have Mrs. Leslie's address, and you can go to her or send for Florence whenever you please."

CHAPTER XXIX.

FOUND AT LAST.

Mrs. Everett's garrulous detail was more exact than usual. Florence had been extremely ill: the succession of fainting fits which had followed the awful discovery that the loved one had departed, only too plainly demonstrated the exhaustion to which she was reduced; and the stupifying lethargy of a nervous fever which ensued, spared her the agony attending her brother's funeral. Nor was it till Mr. Morton's kindness had installed them in small but comfortable apartments at Brompton, that she could in any way rouse herself from the stupor of still over powering languor, and endeavor to resume her duties Her former pupils she had of course been compelled to give up, both from her illness and change of residence, and now, though scarcely strong enough to walk the length of the street, she was tormented with the anxious desire to regain employment. In vain Mrs. Leslie sought to convince her of the impossibility, and to persuade her it was not needed. Florence knew that the continued illness of her beloved Walter had fearfully drained their little finances. She looked on her mother, and shuddered at the very thought of want for her. But how could she

proceed? And in this emergency she applied to their friend, Mr. Morton. He heard her with a paternal smile, but told her she was too late; Minie had been before her, and he had procured her pupils for singing in five highly respectable families, in addition to his own. And Minie, clasping her arms about her sister's neck implored her in bitter tears not to disapprove of the plan; she was in perfect health, and had never known what illness was.

Florence looked on that sweet face, and the thought of Walter, of his love, his care, his terrors for that lovely girl, mingled with the agonized conviction that his protection could never more surround her, that temptation and trial must henceforth be endured alone; and she could only fold Minie closer and closer to her bosom and weep; but she did not deny her wishes. Perhaps she felt her own utter incapacity for exertion; but her consent was only given for a limited time, till she was strong enough again to work. Mr. Morton promised that Minie should receive all the care he could bestow; but even in the few weeks of her new occupation the poor girl learned to know the truth of Walter's fears.

Nor did the task Florence imposed on herself, of arranging Walters papers, tend to aid the recovery of mental calm. Morton, indeed, offered to do this for her; but mournfully she refused: painful as it would be, there was yet a sort of melancholy consolation in guarding from a stranger's eye repositories of thought which Walter had perhaps conveyed to no human ear; and ere her task was completed she rejoiced in her decision. Amongst fugitive papers, containing alike original and selected poetry, manuscript volumes of prose sketches and often the private journal of his thoughts and feelings over which his sister's tears fell thick and unrestrainedly, there was one secret revealed that had never passed those lips, not even to his treasured Florence—a portrait of a fair and lovely girl, which he had sketched from memory, and which a few subjoined lines declared the object of his love. Yes, wedded as he had seemed to his glorious gifts, Walter had loved; and innumerable lines of his latter poems returned to his sister's recollection to confirm this, and reveal the secret magic which had kindled his

wondrous gift to life. But whom that portrait represented Florence knew not; the simple word, "Lucy," was all it bore, and never to her recollection, had Walter breathed the name. And there were passages alike in prose and verse, in which, as if for relief, he had thrown his own burdened soul; and by them it seemed to Florence that his love was as unknown to its object as to every other. Poverty, station, appeared the impassable barriers, and then she understood the wild yearnings to see his work in print, that it might reach *her* hand, and call forth responses from her heart.

"Yes," one paper ran, "yes, beloved and lovely one, thine eyes may glisten with sweet tears as thou lookest on my page, and thou wilt not know how deeply, how indivisibly thine image inspired the poem thou readest. Will any sweet spirit whisper, 'tis the voice of one that loved thee, would have died for thee? Thou wilt mingle with the wealthy and the gay; thy smile will beam on some dearer one. Thou wilt, thou must be loved—and I —oh! to pass away from the world that holds thee, without one regretting tear, one sigh—better, better this than live on, and know I can be naught to thee? Why does poverty fling his links of ice around my soul—chaining me down to earth? Why is wealth so unequally divided, that some must droop and die in penury and woe, and others—God—God of mercy! pardon thou my murmuring—lift up this bruised soul to thee."

And the paper was stained and blotted as by burning tears. And then again she read—

"Death! is it so? Yes. I know that I must die—and wherefore do I shudder and quail? Can it be that I have hoped that talent might do its work, and make me in time even worthy to be loved by *her*—that poesy should bring the poet forward, and even the rich, the noble would court Walter? Down with the delusive hope! I may not live—oh! why does submission fly me, when I thought myself resigned—thought that I loved my God! Earth, earth, when thou holdest love, how may we turn from thee—without grief?"

Another paper, of a later date, bore words such as these—

"It is over—day by day draws me nearer the final goal—and, blessed be my Father, I can die without a pang. She will look upon my work, and love perchance its author—ay, even drop a tear that he hath gone so soon. I shall be with her in her private hours, none other shall divide her thoughts with me. Perchance her lip may give new music to my words, her voice breathe them in song, her heart retain and love them. Oh! that the freed spirit might hover round thee, beloved one, in those moments, till poetry may have more than earthly power. Perchance it will. "Oh, the deep, voiceless bliss, if such may be!"

There were many other similar papers, and Florence felt till that moment she had never before known the fullness of his woe. At all times it needs composure to look over the records of the dead; they seem to speak in spiritual tones, to print themselves upon the heart. Every paper is sanctified, every line is holy; and often and often they tell of suffering and of worth, which we knew not until then; and we mourn, that the feelings they excite must lie withering on our own hearts, for those round whom they yearn to twine have passed away forever.

Florence trusted neither her own nor Mrs. Leslie's composure sufficiently to impart the secret of those papers; she could only throw herself on her mother's neck, and sob forth, "Walter—some future time—his papers are in that chest." And Mrs. Leslie grasped her hand convulsively without the utterance of a single word. She had never shed a tear from the hour her boy departed.

Nor did Minie's buoyant spirit rally; she seemed oppressed as by some heavy gloom, even more than by her brother's death; her child-like trust in Lady St. Maur's continued regard was failing; she had seen the Countess's arrival announced, the new honors bestowed; read day after day her name at some *fête* or drawing-room, and at length her guileless spirit began to incline to her sister's and brother's belief, that all was indeed at an end between them. Oh! how bitterly painful is the first clouding over of youth's sweet visions, the first crushing blight of confidence and love, the first consciousness that life is not so fair and bright, nor friends so true, as we have pictured!

Many thoughts were busy in the heart of Florence

though she spoke them not; strength was gradually returning, but the disinclination for all exertion, the almost loathing with which, in her weakened frame and aching heart, she thought of resuming the tasteless toil of teaching, it seemed as if she could not overcome. How was she, where was she to seek employment? The voice of duty, so peculiarly powerful in her heart, repeatedly prompted, "Write to Lady St. Maur; she has influence, and will aid you." But she felt as if to do so was impossible; she shrunk in agony from appealing for herself, where the appeal for her brother had been so utterly disregarded; yet she thought it pride, and condemned it severely. In the state of physical suffering to which she she was reduced she felt as if the very support of self-esteem had departed from her; that to meet or have any intercourse with Lady St. Maur, now that their social position was so widely severed, she could not endure; shrinking more and more into herself, affliction might have painfully tarnished the beautiful character of Florence, had she not been once more roused by the call of affection, a call never heard by her in vain.

Notwithstanding all Morton's benevolent care and exertion, it became more and more evident that Minie's beauty and extraordinary voice were exposing her to increased annoyance, the more widely she became known: that she was poor and unprotected only gave license to the gay, frivolous idlers, who thronged her path to the houses she visited. Address her they did not, but even her guileless nature could not remain insensible to their openly avowed admiration; and she was too painfully annoyed to conceal it as effectually as she wished from her sister.

It was one lovely afternoon in the beginning of August that Florence sat watching her mother's couch, wrapt in thought too painful, too intense, to admit of her reading as she had intended. Mrs. Leslie had been more than usually unwell, and, to satisfy her daughters, had promised to remain quietly in her room. How long Florence thus sat she knew not; but, fearful lest her resolution should fail, she rose, and moving softly and lightly so as not to disturb her mother, procured writing materials and sat down to her task. But she could go no further; the pen

rested on the paper, and her brain felt dull and heavy with its press of thought. How even to address the Countess St. Maur she knew not; every term she thought of was too familiar or too formal. Her vivid fancy transported her back to days when the very thought of communicating to Lady Ida all her girlish joys and feelings was such happiness—why, why was she so changed? And dropping the pen, she leaned her brow on her hands, and wept bitterly. At that moment she felt Minie's arm thrown round, endeavoring to unclasp her hands with such a joyous whisper, that she looked up startled.

"Go down stairs, Florence; you are wanted in the parlor. Hush! not a question, or we shall disturb mamma—you must go—indeed you are wanted. I will stay here. Go, there's a good girl."

In vain Florence looked the entreaties why she was wanted; Minie was inexorable, and hastily bathing her eyes, she descended to their little sitting-room. A lady was looking intently on poor Walter's last work, "The Poet's Home," which was framed and hung up opposite the door, so that her face, as Florence entered, was turned from her. She knew not why, but power deserted her for the moment, and a gust of wind impelled the door from her trembling hold, and closed it with sufficient noise to make the stranger turn.

"Florence! my dear Florence! I am so glad that I have found you," were the kindly words that greeted her; but she scarcely knew their sense, she only heard the *voice*, which even more than features has power to stir the inmost soul with memory; and felt that the arm of Lady St. Maur was thrown, as in former days, caressingly around her—her kiss was on her cheek.

CHAPTER XXX.

MISCONCEPTIONS EXPLAINED.—FLORENCE AND IDA FRIENDS ONCE MORE.

It was several minutes before Florence could regain composure. Pale, attenuated, and careworn, Lady St. Maur

could barely recognise the laughing, animated girl whom she had last seen; and well could she understand how her unexpected appearance would recall the magic of the past, and so render the present still more sad. As Florence sought to excuse her emotion, by allusion to her late illness and the weakness it had left, there was a slight constraint in her manner, almost unknown to herself, but perceptible to the Countess, whose ready mind at once suspected its cause. "Do not apologize for natural feeling, dearest Florence," she replied; "I am not so changed as to shrink from its display, or to wish for more restraint from you than when we parted: you had then only joy to feel and impart; believe me, I can feel for and sympathize with you equally in sorrow." Florence looked up eagerly, but the words she sought to speak died on her lips. "Florence!" continued the Countess, taking both her hands, and speaking very earnestly, "there is something wrong between us—some mystery—some misconception, which I am here solely to remove. *You* are changed, for you are doubting me: *I* am not; for, though appearances have been strong against you, I will not believe them till confirmed by your own lips."

"Appearances against me!" gasped Florence, her cheek blanching and her lip quivering; "what can you mean?"

"Why have you not written to me Florence, in the heavy cares and sorrows which you have been enduring the last eighteen months? Why did you not obey my last often-repeated injunction—that if my influence could ever serve you, to write to me directly? I know enough of your sad history to be convinced that you have needed that influence more painfully than when I desired you to claim it I imagined possible; yet you have never written. Was this just to me or to yourself? Have you not permitted sensitiveness and pride to come between your heart and my friendship? Even though you did not receive my letter to you on your heavy loss, was that enough for you to lose all confidence, as never to write in still increasing sorrow? Surely, surely affection must have been failing as well as confidence; you did not love me well enough to *ask* my sympathy!"

Vainly did Florence endeavor to reply; a mist seemed to have so folded round her faculties, that both past suffering and present sensation were like the distorted imagination of a fever dream. Had she not written—had she not appealed to that friendship and influence—had she not endured, not only the misery of hope deferred, but of unanswered confidence? And then, with these reproachful, but still kindly words, came the thought that she had indeed failed in affection; for, why had she not so trusted as to write again? She pressed her hands on her burning forehead as in sudden pain.

"Florence, dearest Florence! I did not mean to pain you thus," exclaimed Lady St. Maur, anxiously. "I have been hurt and annoyed at your silence; but perhaps, after all, you have had equal cause to be pained with me. Have you ever written to me? Your answer may remove all this misconception; for, if you have asked my influence and friendship, and received no answer, I can no longer wonder at either your silence or constraint. Am I right now, dearest? Only speak, for I cannot bear to see you thus."

And Florence did speak; for the mist seemed melting from her brain; and she told her she had thought and thought, and at length written, and trusted and hoped; even when weeks dwindled into months, and months into a year, how she had felt that she could not write again; but that now it did indeed seem all pride and doubt which had withheld her. Why, why did she not write again?

"Because you could not believe that important letter should be the only one to miscarry, and imagined that I had changed. I was wrong to reproach you, dearest Florence: you had not known or proved me long enough, to dismiss such too natural suspicion then, as I hope you will henceforward. Do not grieve thus, love, nor think, as I know you do, that had that letter been received, or you had written again, that your heaviest trial might have been averted. Let us only rejoice that we may love each other still." The voice of sympathy and consolation so long unheard, had its effect, and after a brief pause Lady St. Maur continued—"I am going to ask you some strange questions, Florence, but you will forgive them when you

know their reason. Is there, or was there, ever a person bearing your own name?

Florence looked surprised, and answered in the negative.

"Not a Flora or Florence Leslie?"

"Flora Leslie?—yes."

"A relation of Mrs. Rivers, and an inmate of Woodlands?"

"Yes," replied Florence, more and more surprised.

"Did you know her?"

"Intimately. My visits to Woodlands were nominally as her companion."

"And why, in your letters to me from Woodlands, did you never mention her?"

"Because we had so very little in common, nor was she at all a person I thought likely to interest you."

"Why, what sort of person was she, then?" Florence hesitated. "Tell me her whole story, my dear Florence; I wish most particularly to know it. Have no scruples; you will do her no injury with me."

Thus entreated, Florence obeyed, avoiding as much as she could any censorious observations, but revealing concisely and simply the whole system of deceit, coquetry, and intrigue formerly carried on by Flora—her elopement, and the effect it had on Mrs. Rivers, and her own consequent detention at Woodlands.

"Had you any reason to believe that she bore you any personal ill-will?" inquired Lady St. Maur, who had listened to the recital with an interest Florence could not define.

"Only from my compelled agency in the circumstance I have related to you. She professed the contrary, though then I could not believe in such professions; but I did her wrong, I believe, for I have not experienced any unkindness from her."

Lady St. Maur put her arm involuntarily round her young companion at these words, her eyes glistening as she thought how that gentle, unsuspicious nature had been deceived.

"She has done you injury, my Florence, by her very similarity of name."

"But that she could not help," replied Florence, simply

"She could help the shameful falsehood of signing Florence instead of Flora Leslie, as I know she has done to more than one individual—a deceit which no doubt originated the annoyance and pain of your unjust expulsion from Mrs. Russel's family."

"Mrs. Russel!" repeated Florence in extreme astonishment.

"Mrs. Russel, dearest. How do you think I could have found you, if I had not made inquiries? One more question—are there any other points of resemblance between Mrs. Major Hardwicke (thank heaven she can do you no more injury as Flora Leslie) and yourself besides name?"

"We are very unlike," answered Florence, simply.

"I have not the smallest doubt of it, my love. And it will be a direct contradiction to the theory of handwriting disclosing character, if what I suspect be true. Is your handwriting alike?"

"So much so, with a very trifling effort on either her part or mine, that even mamma has scarcely recognised the one from the other; nay, I have been puzzled once or twice myself. Why do you ask, dearest Lady St. Maur? tell me, pray tell me! It cannot be that she has sought to injure me with you," exclaimed Florence, a light flashing on her mind; and she looked up in the Countess's face pale with terror.

"She has not injured you with me, love; I am still your friend, as I trust you will find me; but that she has done you a cruel injury is, I fear, too true. Painful as the discovery will be to you, my Florence, I believe it had better be revealed. You tell me you wrote to me from Woodlands on the 24th of July, and could not imagine why that most important letter should be the only one to miscarry; it would not have miscarried, (Florence started and gasped for breath,) for its substitute reached me in perfect safety. This was the letter I received. I will not do you such injustice as even to ask you if it be yours."

"Almost choked with strong emotion, Florence grasped the offered letter, opened it, and read; and dropping it, gazed wildly into the face of Lady St. Maur, faintly murmuring—"Walter! Walter! you were the victim!" threw

herself on the Countess's neck and burst into passionate tears.

Lady St. Maur permitted her to weep, even while she sought with earnest tenderness to remove the agonized impression that, had her own letter been received, Walter's fate might have been averted. It was no difficulty for her to use the language of that spiritual consolation which alone can soothe; for religion was to her the very breath of her existence—not in word, but in deed; not in form, but in thought; impossible to be described, but so infusing her simplest word and most trifling action, that the most heedless *felt* its influence, though its origin was invisible. It was easy for such a mind and heart truly to console, and lead the bruised spirit to its only resting-place. And as Florence gradually recovered, Lady St. Maur entered more particularly into the reason of her questionings; narrating all that had passed both in Italy and England, to mislead and mystify her; avoiding all which could give unnecessary pain, by exalting her own merits in not doubting her when every one else did, but simply stating facts—the combination of circumstances which had prevented her applying by letter for the meaning of an epistle which from the first she had doubted as coming from Florence. So that even while deeply wounded, as she could not fail to be, at the discovery of such cruel injury, she was inexpressibly soothed by the conviction of the confidence and affection felt towards her by the friend she had so long loved.

Lady St. Maur did not leave without seeing Mrs. Leslie, and she was shocked and grieved at the change she beheld, too forcibly impressing the conviction, that all of sorrow for the sisters was not yet past. The widow was painfully agitated. "The strong man and the beautiful alike are gone," she said, after a pause, and in a tone that thrilled through her hearers; "and I, the weak, the suffering, the useless, am still spared. Yet who may question the decrees of the Eternal? My husband and my child are with Him, and He will take me to them when He deems it best."

The young Countess listened reverentially, her whole manner betraying how completely she felt that sorrow and

suffering had sanctified and raised the widow, much higher in the scale of immortal being than rank or wealth And hundreds might have envied the feelings of pure and blissful satisfaction with which, after a very lengthened visit, Lady St Maur returned to her own lordly home, finding an increase of individual happiness in her unceasing thoughts and care for the happiness of others.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SCENE IS CHANGED.—LADY IDA'S PLANS.—THE SECRET STILL.

In less than three months, the position of the Leslie family, both domestic and social, was so changed, that had it not been for one sad thought, their past sufferings would have seemed a passing dream. But who, however sanctified and spiritualized by true piety, can yet entirely subdue the anguish of bereavement, or realize what they at some time most deeply feel, that the fate of the beloved departed in such undying felicity, it would indeed be selfish love to call them back once more. But Mrs. Leslie was not one to undervalue present blessings because they had come too late for him to whom they would indeed have ministered such joy. Minie had no more need to leave the safety of her lowly home; and Florence, her noble Florence, was sought for, loved, cherished, as her gentle virtues claimed.

The Countess St. Maur's friendship, like her benevolence, was of no *passive* nature. Convinced herself that not a shadow of suspicion could attach itself to the conduct of Florence, she *proved* her innocence to Lady Mary, the Earl, and his mother, by bringing her and Captain Camden (who had returned from Malta with his regiment) unexpectedly together, a manœuvre insisted upon by Alfred Melford, who introduced the captain for the purpose, and declared that the manner of their meeting must confirm or deny Miss Leslie's identity with the coquette of Winchester far more completely than any thing else. The gallant captain certainly started and colored at the

name, but recovered himself the instant that he glanced at its unknown bearer; and Florence's calm and unconcerned bow when he was presented to her, with some degree of *empressement* by Melford, must have convinced the most suspicious that she had never seen him before, much less carried on the correspondence of which she was accused.

Lady Mary was highly indignant that the Countess should have thought any such proof necessary; she had already met Florence with extended hand and cordial smile, her prejudice having completely vanished from the time Melford had so eloquently repeated Mrs. Everett's narrative. Whether his eloquence had any thing to do with it, we will not pretend to say; completely a creature of impulse, she was now as warm in the cause, as she had before been cool. Minie's excessive loveliness had irresistibly attracted her, and innumerable plans for her making a proper use of that beauty and splendid voice, by an introduction to the highest circles, which she would take care to bring about, and so making a match of such *éclat*, as to excite the envy of the whole fashionable world; plans we need scarcely say, completely shattered by the positive disapproval of the Countess St. Maur, who insisted that her mother's roof was the best place for one so lovely. It required no small portion of dispassionate arguments, on the part of the Countess, to bring her friend to reason, and convince her, that she could materially add to the happiness of her beautiful favorite, without bringing her so unduly forward. It was strange, perhaps, that with her secret feelings towards Melford, she did not *fear* to bring Minie so forward; but Lady Mary had not such an unworthy emotion in her nature. She was becoming more and more conscious of very strong regard, and a most earnest longing in the very midst of her badinage and constant quarrelings, that Alfred Melford would find something in her to approve and respect, as much as he did in his cousin Ida; whether he did or not, she could not feel quite sure, yet she would no more have descended to the petty meanness of decrying, or concealing the beauty and worth of another, than she could have betrayed, by the faintest sign or word, her secret love.

To very many persons, situated as was Lady St. Maur, the means of effectually serving Florence would have been sufficiently difficult as to prevent the exertion required. To provide employment in their own establishment would be impossible, because it would be very disagreeable to treat as an inferior one with whom they had once associated almost upon equality; yet if they occupied the position of companion or governess, it would be difficult to do otherwise.

The Lady St. Maur's notions were, by a certain set, considered very nearly akin to insanity, and only endured, because of that indescribable something, which, when in her presence, none could resist, was a matter of very little importance either to herself or her family; but never did she value her rank and influence so much, as when she felt how completely they raised her above such opinions, leading others often to do good deeds, not for their own worth, but because so did the Countess St. Maur.

Her first care was to endeavor to restore the elasticity of health, which Florence had not felt for many long months, and in some of the pleasant drives, *tête-à-tête*, which, combining pure air and mental recreation, were gratefully beneficial, she drew from Florence her own wishes and plans.

"But my dear girl, Minie appears much more fitted than yourself for the arduous toil of instruction," the Countess one day said; "she has stronger health and better spirits, and may be sure of a sufficiency of pupils, why not change your respective duties?"

"Because, Lady St. Maur, I pledged myself years ago never to let Minie leave her mother."

"But are you not making an unnecessary sacrifice, Florence? Minie does not dislike the life she leads."

"Only because it allows me to remain at home. But when I remember how Walter shrunk in agony from such a life for Minie, how my father's heart would have broken, could he have seen his darling exposed to the rude world as she is now, I cannot let her continue. Besides it is unjust; when I found myself, in conjunction with my brother, as representatives of our lamented father, I knew that all our own little fortune must be sacrificed; but

Minie and my mother were spared this. How then can I remain idle, when I, in fact, am the only one called upon to work?"

"And can nothing change this resolution, Florence? Do duty and inclination both point the same way?"

"They will, I hope, in time. I dare not answer that they do now; many, many feelings must rise up to cause a strife between them."

"Amongst which, not the least painful is, that as dependent, chained to one employment day after day, how can the Countess St. Maur be to Florence Leslie as she is now? and it is hard that circumstances should again throw a barrier between her and the little unselfish heart which, through years of apparent unkindness and neglect, has loved her so truely. Am I very conceited, Florence, or do I read aright?"

Florence looked up, her eyes swelling in large tears, but she did not attempt reply.

"Now, suppose independence could be made your own, removing all necessity for you to leave your mother, would you accept it?"

"Not while I have health and power to labor," replied Florence, firmly; "unless it came from a near and dear relative. Such a one I have not in the wide world. No —however I might love the friend who would do this, that love would become a weight instead of joy. I should be depressed and burdened, lowered in my own estimation, and surely in that of others. I would retain my own integrity and independence, and I should feel as if both were compromised in accepting such an obligation. If this be too much pride, forgive it, dear Lady St. Maur. I could not retain your esteem and regard, did I feel otherwise."

"It is I who must ask forgiveness, dearest Florence. I have been trying you too severely, but I wished to convince my reason before I acted on my feelings. Now listen to my plans, and perhaps duty and inclination may be more closely connected than you fancy."

And she proceeded to state her wishes that Florence should become an inmate of her family. Not as a useless member, she added with a smile, for that she saw Florence

was much too proud to be; but to be useful in a multitude of ways, partly as Lady Helen's companion; for since their arrival in London, that lady, not wishing to enter into the vortex of fashionable life, so incumbent on her son and daughter, was in consequence obliged at times to be left alone; and partly to superintend the education of Constance St. Maur, the little girl, it may be remembered, left by the last Baron St. Maur, under the guardianship of his heir and Lady Ida. From what she had seen of this child, the Countess said she was being completely ruined by the foolish fondness of an old relative, and the superficial education of a professed fashionable establishment, that she had not intended to have taken her so young from school, but on consideration had determined on performing her promise to the child's father to the utmost, by giving her at once the advantages of a residence under her own roof. The mere drudgery of teaching she had resolved should not devolve on Florence, who, she was convinced had not physical strength for it; but she wished her to superintend her education, to instruct the *heart* more than the *head*, to train the will and temper yet more than the mind; to do this for Constance now, and in one or two years more for her own darlings Helen, and Ida, whom she and the Earl would trust with Florence as confidently and securely as with herself; and in addition to all this, she laughingly pursued, resolved on checking the strong emotion with which her companion sought to reply, to be still the Countess's friend, and in that character, to be called upon for services in her large establishment far too numerous to name. Would these momentous duties render her a sufficiently useful member of the family, to receive whatever salary the Countess might choose, without compromise of her own proud independence.

"That depends," replied Florence, with a smile almost as arch as those of former years.

"Indeed! well then, Miss Leslie, you are to please to remember that firstly, I have engaged you, not for one, but for a variety of duties. Secondly, that in my establishment you will incur personal expenses, which you would not incur at home; and, lastly, which combines all the rest, my will is law, and being in these matters incom-

parably wiser than yourself, you will abide by my decision Have you not yet found out, Florence," she continued in her own tone, "that I have a will of my own, and, in consequence, hold the world's supreme authority on some things in most supreme contempt, on nothing more than the manner in which it regards those invaluable friends to whom we intrust the moral and mental training of our children."

Lady St. Maur was not, however, content with securing Florence's personal comfort alone. At her request, Sir Charles Brashleigh visited Mrs. Leslie, and on giving his opinion that though fearfully shattered by anxiety and trial, and the victim of a disease in itself quite incurable, the pure air and repose of the country would be far more beneficial than a residence in London. A beautiful little cottage on their estate in Warwickshire was offered to Mrs. Leslie by the Earl, to occupy either as a yearly tenant, or on lease, whichever she might prefer. Its greatest attraction, he declares, being its close vicinity to Florence, who, for at least six or eight months in the year, would be living at Amersley Hall, not ten minutes' walk from the cottage.

"The tie which has bound you so closely in years of suffering, must not be severed in joy," he said, with feeling. "There is to me an actual sancity in family love, which I wish my children taught by example as well as precept; and I know not where they would see it more forcibly before them than in your family."

Lord and Lady St. Maur knew well how to secure gratitude, for Mrs. Leslie and her daughters felt raised, not lowered, by the appreciating kindness they received.

On the night after their taking possession of their little cottage (Minie's delight not a little increased by the plentiful supply of ancient and modern music sent down expressly for her use) Mrs. Leslie thought long and painfully before she retired to rest. Again her fearful secret weighed upon her, filling her with reproach and dread.

Associated with the noblest and the best—weave round her yet more strongly Lady St. Maur's regard. Is it indeed wrong to permit this, and still be silent?" So ran her mysterious communings. "Yet is not my child worthy?—oh, how nobly worthy!—and shall the dark truth blight

all of returning happiness? But why not to the Countess alone?—would she, too, look on my poor child as the outcast—the victim? How may I risk it? Why did I teach those infant lips to call me by so sweet a name, which is in truth not mine? It is vain—vain! I cannot recall it now. If concealment be sin—oh, let its punishment fall on me; but spare, Father of Mercy! spare my child!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE HEART'S AWAKENING.

"ALL women love, have loved, or are capable of loving," wrote an elegant delineator of the female heart; and though Florence had arrived at the age of two-and-twenty, and we have not once written the magic word in conjunction with herself, it was nor that she was incapable of the emotion, but that she had never associated with any one at all likely to call it forth. Her life, as we have seen, had passed in comparative obscurity. The precarious health of her mother and brother, and many anxieties and cares, had prevented all society. Day after day, often from ten till six, passed in the mechanical art of teaching, could be little productive of any feeling save that of exhausting weariness, which yearns only for rest and quietness, seeming to shrink even from the idea of happiness, if to obtain it demanded exertion. No reality, therefore, could take possession of her heart; but fancy had not been idle.

Minie had very often wondered what there could be in long political details to interest her sister, and, perhaps, Florence sometimes wondered herself; but there was a spell in the youthful eloquence of Francis Howard, even in its tame repetition by the press, that was acknowledged by all England. Was it wonder, then, that Florence, with a heart and mind so peculiarly awake to beauty and truth, should find pleasure in its perusal? It had been only the last session that young Howard had actually

been in the House, and even then, by a most unprecedented triumph of public favor, for he had barely completed his twenty-first year; but his great talents, his truth-seeking and truth-proclaiming mind had through various striking pamphlets already made him known, and it was long extracts from these which had so often riveted the attention and admiration of Florence.

In the happy memories of Lady Ida's ball, Francis Howard had always stood forth conspicuous. Florence's intuitive perception of mental nobility had even then distinguished him as different to any other of her partners; and delighting in his conversation and in the zest with which, like herself, he entered into the enjoyments of the evening, had danced with him more often than with any one else, not thinking a moment of his attention to herself, but simply that it was a pleasure to talk to so intelligent a person.

During his week's sojourn at St. John's she had met him often, but had regarded him with no softer feeling than that of pleasant companionship. The many cares and sorrows which afterwards ensued had, as it were, riveted these memories with a sweetness, which might not have been the case had she been more happily situated in after life. The name of Francis Howard had attracted her, and she read the various notices about him simply from the memory of the past. The more she read, the more she felt how congenial would be his mind and Walter's; that Howard would indeed have given her brother's glorious gift its due; and perhaps this longing had added to the bitterness of disappointment at Lady St. Maur's silence.

Our readers will perhaps remember that young Howard had been with Melford the day that Florence had called on the Viscountess, when anxious to obtain her influence in procuring a situation, and that they had accompanied her to the stage on her way home. Melford had indeed been the principal spokesman on that occasion, but the countenance of Howard, the few words, but most respectful manner, filling up the image which his eloquence, had created even more than the memory of the past, had lingered strangely, and at first almost engrossingly, on

the vivid imagination of Florence, adding increase of eagerness to read in his writings the reflection of his mind. How many, many hours of solitude at Mrs. Russel's heightened this illusion in exact conformity with the truth-breathing sentence which we quoted at the commencement of this chapter. Florence neither loved, nor had loved, but the vast capabilities in her heart for that emotion, occasioned the creation of an *image* to satisfy its yearnings. The trials which followed her departute from Mrs. Russel's, though they rendered such thoughts less engrossing, could not banish them entirely. She was herself perfectly unconscious of their nature or their power; rather rejoicing that circumstances had prevented her from ever experiencing that emotion, whose power and intensity she had so instinctively dreaded in her youth.

We are no believers in what is termed love at first sight, but we do believe that some faces have the power of attraction, and are the magnet, as it were, to the needle of the mind, so holding the fancy chained. For this infatuation, intimate association is as often the *cure* as the *confirmer*. Still, even when the latter is *not love*, but simply a species of animal magnetism, chaining the mind to one object, love itself never comes till the yearning is swallowed up in the truth, the worth, the affection of the being with whom the invisible chain hath bound us, making two *one* ere either was aware.

The months of September and October were pleasant months at Amersley. The intimate friends of Lord and Lady St. Maur were constantly staying with them, occasioning a series of domestic enjoyments, peculiarly pleasurable to Florence. From actual gayety, her heart, still filled with the memories of Walter, would painfully have shrunk; but this was not *gayety*, it was *enjoyment*. That her young charge often occasioned her disappointment, demanding extreme forbearance and control, to obtain dominion over a proud, sullen spirit, and uncomplying temper, were difficulties in her task which Florence not only determined to overcome, but met willingly, satisfied that in patiently seeking to subdue the faults of Constance, she was really forwarding the wishes of her friends, and proving also her own earnest desire to evince herself

worthy of the important trust she held. Mornings of even ungrateful employment would have been more than recompensed by the enjoyment of the afternoon and evening. Neither pomp nor fashion found entrance within the hospitable halls of Amersley. It was truly an ENGLISH HOME, like which, seek the world over, and there is no other. Affection, intellect, refinement, inspired and guided employment and recreation. From Lady Helen to little Cecil, (Lord St. Maur's youngest child,) from the Earl himself to his lowliest retainer, all seemed infused with a spirit of happiness, as innocent as it was reviving, and overflowing in uncounted channels of benevolence for many miles around. In this home enjoyment of the Earl and Countess, of course, none but congenial spirits found admission, and by all these was Florence universally regarded with that cordial and heart-felt appreciation so reviving to one whom trial and care had so long claimed, that she often felt as if she had not one loveable quality remaining. Lady Helen, who was never easily pleased, soon learned to love her dearly, and no longer wonder at the friendship towards her which her daughter-in-law had so unchangeably retained.

And what was the secret of this universal kindness? The utter absence of pretension, which so characterized her conduct, that she never for one moment forgot her real position, or presumed in the smallest degree on the notice she received. Her own self-respect had always taught her the respect due to others; and perhaps it was this part of her character which had so strongly attracted the regard and approbation of the Earl, who, in his heart of hearts, had once, perhaps, feared that his wife, energetic as she was would scarcely be able to carry out her plans, and that the footing on which she resolved on placing Florence in her establishment would engender too much familiarity between them. He did not know the character of Florence,—Lady St. Maur had told him, and she did, and that made all the difference.

Emily and Alfred Melford were often amongst the visitors at Amersley. The exertions of Lady St. Maur had all failed with regard to the former. She had been too long the victim of inertness with fancied ill-health to

overcome it; but still at Amersley she was conscious of more happiness, or rather less *ennui* than any where else. Alfred had found out that he was not quite as indifferent to a certain Lady Mary as he fancied himself, and therefore when she was at Amersley, there too was he.

Frank Howard's political duties never allowed him a very long sojourn at the hall, but he made up by the number for the shortness of his visits. Peculiarly and painfully situated by the morose character and anchorite habits of his father, he had endeavored to forget the gloomy sadness of his domestic roof by embarking all his energies in following a brilliant public career. His heart, however, was naturally much too full of all the kindly home affections for such a life entirely to satisfy him; and he turned to Lord St. Maur's happy circle with an earnest longing for such a home himself. Feeling deeply for his insolated domestic position, and greatly admiring his talents, more particularly as she saw that her husband was his model of manly worth, Frank was an especial favorite of the Countess, who often spoke of him to Florence, revealing many little traits of his boyhood which increased the interest he had unconciously inspired.

The reported riches of his strange father, all of which he would inherit, had made him so courted and flattered by match-making mothers, that his manner towards women became as reserved and cold as to be almost a proverb, and even at Amersley this peculiarity did not quite leave him; but to Florence no one could be kinder or more respectful; nothing, indeed, to cause remark, but seeming to make her feel how truly he respected her as Florence Leslie, how fully he could appreciate her domestic worth and unpretending usefulness.

Minie Leslie's susceptibility of enjoyment was actually infectious. Constituted superintendent of Lady St. Maur's village schools—the right hand of the venerable clergyman amongst his poor—as happy the sole companion of her mother as in the halls of Amersley, Minie's life was one flood of sunshine. Even the fond recollection of Walter could not cloud this light; for if she were so happy on earth, she felt, what must he be in heaven?

Florence had often longed to introduce her sister to Howard, but by a curious combination of circumstances, it appeared as if fate had determined that they should not meet. It seemed as if the happiness of both sisters needed little of increase, but yet another of the seeds sown in sorrow was now to burst forth in joy.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FRANK HOWARD.—YEARNINGS FOR AFFECTION.—THE GIFT RESTORED.

"WHY, Florence, what correspondent can have the power of making you look so disappointed?" asked the Countess one evening, as they retired to the drawing-room after dinner. It was late in the autumn, and only the family were at the Hall. "Why you look as guilty and confused as if there were some love business in the case I am curious."

"No such grave business, I assure you," was her reply. "I was foolish enough to hope that a jewel I parted with, nearly a twelvemonth ago, might be recovered, and Mr. Danvers' reply that he had long ago lost all trace of it caused a painful feeling of disappointment."

"And how do I know but that it is not an *affaire de cœur*, after all? Such a precious jewel can surely only be a love token."

"No, dear Lady St. Maur, it was no token of love, but of friendship. Forgive me, if I seemed to hold your gift in little value; only to fulfil what I felt were the wishes of the dying could it thus have gone."

"And do not regret it, Florence; I know you too well to think you parted with it lightly. Besides, there is a spell in those emeralds," she added, laughingly; "know you not they are the emblems of constancy, and not only lose all their brilliancy if touched by a faithless hand, but are dim and dull till they return to the hand that gave or to the true heart that resigns them? Now, if Danvers sold them to any but the right person, they will be useless, lacking all light and lustre; but if——"

She was interrupted by the entrance of Lord St. Maur and Frank Howard, talking so earnestly that the latter did not even salute the Countess till she spoke

"Frank! here again so soon, when you declared Amersley should not see you for two months; you were going to study so deeply. I wish you joy of your perseverance; it is just one week since we bade you farewell. What are you so earnest about? Politics again, those hateful politics, only tolerated for my husband's sake, though the wise world does choose to dub me his prompter and adviser.

"But this is not politics, Lady St. Maur; it is poetry, the finest, purest, truest, which this prose-loving world has seen for many a long day. It has created a greater sensation than has been felt this age; the more perhaps that it is a posthumous work. The glorious genius who has poured out his whole soul on these pages may give us no more. I am here fairly from curiosity, for Morton refused to answer any inquiries, referring me for all information to the Earl, or Miss Leslie, to whom I am the bearer of a large parcel from him. But how pale you look, Miss Leslie! you are ill."

Florence had indeed sunk back on her chair, pale as death; but she gazed on the book which Howard almost instinctively gave her; her eyes glanced on words which seemed breathed in her ear once more by the very voice of Walter. The book fell from her powerless hold, and dropping her face on her hands, she burst into tears.

A few words explained the apparent mystery to Frank, whose sympathy, instantly excited at first, was enraged at his own precipitancy, and then launched into such an eloquent narration of the work's extraordinary success, of the interest felt for the young and nameless poet, from the touching memoir annexed to it by the self-constituted editor, Morton; of the speedy demand which he was sure there would be for a second edition, when he hoped the poet's name would not be withheld; that those who had neglected him in life, only because success had not crowned his genius, might know what a being they had scorned—that Florence was enabled to rally from her natural emotion, and listen, with melancholy pleasure, to Howard's

words. Morton's letter to herself, and the several reviews he had forwarded, confirmed all the young man said, even to his desire and intention, with Mrs. Leslie's permission, of publishing the next edition with the author's name. The beauty and taste in which the work had been got up could not fail to strike Florence, and she almost feared that Morton's generous appreciation had outstripped his judgment. She did not know, nor did she ever know, that it was to the Earl's admiration of the poems, when first told their tale by Morton, that the work owed its present attractions of type and illustrations, that full justice to the beautiful designs of the young artist might be done. Eagerly, when Florence retired, did Frank listen to Lady St. Maur's narrative of Walter's sufferings, and his family's devotion. Reverence for genius was a strong feature in Howard's character; and that Florence had tended the sufferings, soothed the sorrows, and sympathized with every spiritual dream, endowed her, in his eyes, with a portion of the sacredness encircling the poet's self.

We will leave to the imagination of our readers the mother's feelings, as from the quivering lips of Florence on the following day she heard that a world had acknowledged the mighty genius of her angel boy; a world was paying homage to his name in death—his name who in life had scarcely found a friend.

It was a lovely autumn morning that Florence returned to the Hall from her mother's cottage, welcoming the sunshine as enabling her to join her pupils by their usual breakfast hour. The trees were almost all bare of leaves, but to her eye there was a charm in their delicate tracery against the clear blue sky, in the rich dark green of the holly, and here and there in the red and yellow leaves still lingering on the spray. A slight hoar frost had woven its net-work on some of the trees, and lay in beautiful tracery on the fresh green grass, and a clear stream, swollen by some heavy rains, laughed and gurgled in the sunshine, bearing many a jagged branch and yellow leaf along with it. The air was fresh and exhilarating, and Florence walked on briskly, thinking on; she herself would have said so many things, that we may not disbe-

lieve her, though if there be a mesmeric power, as some say, to bring those on whom we are pondering palpably before us, a voice at her side would certainly betray who it was that occupied at least a portion of her thoughts.

"You are an early riser, Miss Leslie. Why, most people are still in their chambers, if not on their couches. The sun has only just peeped out himself."

"Do you not know the old adage, Mr. Howard, 'An hour lost in the morning is never found all day.' My pupil and I must not abuse Lady St. Maur's indulgence yesterday by wasting our best hours to-day. Now you have no such weighty incentive, yet I find you enjoying this beautiful morning too."

"I do enjoy it. The mornings of the fall of the year are sometimes so lovely as to make amends for the gloomy dusk. November is no month for suicides in the country, whatever it may be in London. Do you share your brother's feeling on the subject of 'autumn?'" And he repeated, with real pathos and rich intonation, one of Walter's most beautiful poems. A conversation of much interest naturally followed, and Florence was surprised, and almost alarmed at the passionate earnestness with which, in allusion to the love she and Walter had borne each other, he exclaimed, "Yes! in spite of all his sufferings, privations, cares, Walter Leslie was a being to be envied. Oh! Miss Leslie, you cannot know how I yearn for the ties of blood, how my heart envies all who bend to feel a mother's kiss or clasp a sister's hand. How strange it seems to me, that any one who possesses such sweet ties should heed them not, and never think them blessings. I never knew a mother's love; strangers nursed me, hirelings only loved me; in childhood I scarcely knew that I had a father—in boyhood he was not one to win my love, and even had he been, could not have filled my soul's deep yearnings for the gentler, dearer fondness of a mother, or a sister, to love, protect, be proud of, and to give me back all the love I felt. Your brother knew such love. In the midst of woe, and bodily and mental ill, it shone around him like an angel's smile; and, oh! I would bear his burden, heavy as it was, to be so cherished, so beloved."

Florence had never heard Frank revert to himself before,

even in his most unguarded moments; but she did recollect once, when called upon by the children to settle some trifling dispute, when caressing the little pouting Cecil into good humor, and bidding him kiss his sister, Ella saying, with much deeper emotion than the occasion warranted—"Kiss her, love her, Cecil; you do not know yet what a sister will be to you; perhaps you will never know, for you may never feel the void which life is without one." And this, though it passes little heeded at the time, confirmed his present passionate words. To reply was rather difficult; but Howard, as if half-ashamed of his own emotion, talked on other things, and so entertainingly, that the walk to the Hall seemed marvellously shorter than usual.

"Miss Leslie, Miss Leslie!" exclaimed a sweet childish voice, as Florence was dressing for dinner that day, and the little Ida bounded through the readily opened door—"Mamma says I am to give you this, and to tell you that if you ever part with it *now*, these beautiful stones *must* grow dim and dull, and can never return to you again." And to Florence's extreme surprise she received from the eager child her own identical cross and chain.

"I know not if the legend be a true one after all," said the Countess, as Florence, on joining her, entreated her only to tell her if that too had been one of the many witnesses against her. "It told me indeed that you *loved* me still, but had ceased to *trust* me; yet how can the one truth be perfect without the other."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE PORTRAIT AND ITS COUNTERPART.

FRANK HOWARD'S deep interest in Walter naturally led him to Mrs. Leslie's cottage, and so much pleasure did he find in his first visit that he repeated it whenever he came to the Hall. By one of those curious coincidences which we sometimes find, he never once met Minie, even at her mother's cottage, though not a little

anxious to do so. not only from the admiration with which he always lingered on her picture, both in Walter's own painting and in the frontispiece to his book, but from discovering that hers was the exquisite voice which had so charmed him at Morton's. The curious chances which always seemed to prevent the best laid plans for their introduction to each other, became at length quite a jest between the persons concerned; Minie declaring that if she ever should meet Mr. Howard, she should certainly think something extraordinary was impending, and Florence feeling almost vexed that the time had come for their leaving Amersley without this desired introduction having taken place.

The respectful deference which Frank ever manifested towards Mrs. Leslie, his unfeigned admiration of Walter's genius, rendered still dearer by the strong feeling with which he alluded to his character and trials, naturally won Mrs. Leslie's heart, and she looked forward to the young man's visits as periods of enjoyment. But the train of thought which they left behind them was as indefinable as it was engrossing. Something in his countenance seemed to rest upon her momory as having been seen before, yet indistinctly as the vision of a dream. Just before Lord St. Maur and his family's departure for London, Howard had come as usual, staying perhaps the longer as he thought it would be several months before he should be in that part of England again, when he hoped, he said with a smile, that the spell upon his meeting Minie would be broken, and they would be personally as intimate as he felt they were in all else already. He conversed for some time with even more than wonted animation, and when he left her, Mrs. Leslie remained buried in thought, which thronged upon her more mysteriously, yet more incongruous than usual. Suddenly a flash seemed to illumine their darkness, but with a light too painful to be borne.

"It cannot be," she involuntarily exclaimed aloud, "*cannot* be, or if there be indeed similarity, it must be only accidental. The expression is so different, as unlike as an angel to a fiend, and yet the outline of the face, the features themselves, these are alike, it is vain to

deny it; but the name, the title, they were not his, even in perspective. No, no, the thought is folly; there can be no danger to the child—the very likeness is unlike."

But the thought would return, perhaps more perseveringly from the depression occasioned by the parting from Florence, for some months' residence in London.

The political duties of the Earl took him up to town rather before what is called the season; but for the first time in her life the great city appeared almost as agreeable a residence to Florence as the country. The Countess seemed determined he should see it in other coloring than that of care and sorrow; and its magazines of art and science, its galleries, were painting and sculpture marked the progress of British genius—its varied avenues to literature and music—its interesting antiquities, and associations with men of genius of the past, as well as of the present, all were revealed to the eyes and mind of Florence, and found her willing and rejoicing to acknowledge that there was much indeed in the capital of her country to call for admiration and reverence from the hearts of her sons. She saw, too, that influence and benevolence were not to be confined to life in the country, that to do good was not, as Emily Melford had once solemnly assured her, incompatible with a London life. In her youth the Lady Ida Villiers had been taught by a judicious father those fearful abuses which are now made the subject of so many able pens, but which, twenty years ago, were scarcely known beyond the range of the sufferers themselves. An enlightened politician, because a true patriot himself, the late Lord Edgemere, had made it his business to become thoroughly acquainted with the sufferings of the *working-poor*, had associated his daughter with his *practical* benevolence, which was extending widely even at the very time that his theory was considered by his compeers as but the delusions of a fever dream. Edmund St. Maur had imbibed these visionary projects, and now he and his Countess worked hand-in-hand for the amelioration of those over-tasked and suffering classes, of whose very existence Emily Melford, and very many besides herself, were wholly ignorant. At the period of our tale,

seven years ago, such benevolence was confined to some few enlightened and noble-minded individuals. How rejoicingly must the philanthropist regard the march of time, as associated with the amelioration of his species, when he reflects on the spirit working now, that the social evils, invisible and impalpable before, are now rising before men's eyes and minds, rendered strong and mighty, far-spreading in their appeal for redress and removal, alike by the pen of genius and the exertions of the good. In these views, and in their practice, as in every thing else, the Countess St. Maur associated Florence as a friend capable not only of assisting, but of understanding and sympathizing in them. Innumerable little things proved to her grateful heart that the Countess indeed spoke as she felt, when she assured her that she could leave home with a heart as light again as the last season, for she knew her place was so faithfully supplied, both to her mother and her children; often concluding with a very mischievous smile—"If you should ever marry, Florence, what shall I do? If the gentleman be not exactly what I approve, I shall refuse my consent, depend upon it." And Florence would declare she need be under no fear, for she was much too happy as she was ever to think of marrying. Nor did she think of it; the idea of love, she believed, had never entered her mind; not dreaming that the peculiar pleasure she felt in the society of one individual could proceed from such a source. Love! she smiled at the bear idea. How could she, a portionless, unattractive girl, ever dream of being loved! and unless love were offered, how could she return it? And so she mingled amongst the select circle of Lady St. Maur's intimate friends, who always proffered her the gratification of attention and appreciation, which the Countess insisted on her accepting; mingled with them, as she believed, love-proof, pleasing and willing to be pleased; but, as she imagined, neither attracting nor feeling any stronger emotion.

Meanwhile a second edition had been called for of Walter's poems, and his name being now universally known Florence had often the melancholy gratification of receiving kindness and attention for his sake, from those whose mind and heart could appreciate the genius gone.

More than once she found herself unconsciously searching for the original of that lovely portrait, which revealed the object of his secret, but all-engrossing love. His fragments of thought had disclosed that he loved one so far above him that they could never be united, and that he had loved unknown, unsuspected by its object. The portrait had riveted the face upon her memory, but she searched for its living counterpart in vain.

Can it be that the theory of the ancients has some faint shadowing of truth—that souls are sent on the earth in pairs, and wander lonely and sorrowing on their diverse paths, till their kindred essence again is found, and their union on earth is the faint shadow of the bliss awaiting them in heaven? That therefore is it there are sorrow and anguish in unrequited, aye, and often in requited love, for seldom is it the souls paired in heaven are joined on earth. Love may be felt, but oceans and deserts, or the yet wider barriers of poverty and wealth, may stretch between the two souls yearning for each other, and thus they clothe another with the unanswered light gleaming for their own; and therefore it is that some unions seeming of love, fade into indifference and neglect, but when wedded life is such joy that the love felt before marriage is as nothing, compared to the deep affection afterwards, brightening more and more into the perfect day, through lingering years and their varying ordeals each soul has found its kindred soul, and they are one again forever. Can this be? Who on earth may answer?

"Miss Leslie," said Sir Charles Brashleigh, one day, as he was partaking the Earl's family dinner, I have made a promise in your name which I depend on your goodness to fulfil. It is to accompany me on a visit to a young patient, who, I greatly fear, is fast sinking from decline, the primary cause of which is hidden in mystery. Your brother's poems are never out of her hands, often occasioning such emotion, that I have threatened to refuse her the luxury of reading them; but it is only a threat, and she knows it, for no earthly emotion can harm her now, poor girl! I cannot help believing there has been some ill-fated love at work, undermining her

health; but her family declare it to be utterly impossible. She was scarcely introduced into society before she became ill. I asked her one day if she felt any wish to know the family of the poet, whose genius she admired so much? Her cheek quite flushed with the eagerness of her assent; and turning to the frontispiece, I told her all I knew about it, and how fondly the poet had been loved by his family, asking her which of his sisters she most wished to see. Her face had been turned from me, and when she looked up again, I was terrified at its ghastly whiteness, and the strange quivering of her lips before she could speak, she pointed on the figure I had said was yours, and faintly articulated. 'The one you say is Florence—she was older, could love him best, and he so loved her.' And so I promised—was I right?"

"Oh yes, Sir Charles, I will go with you with pleasure; if she can so love my Walter in his poems, I need no more to love and feel for her."

Sir Charles thanked her with a kindly nod, and the Countess inquired who his patient was?

"The youngest daughter of Sir William Lennox, the head, although the passive one, of some large mercantile house connected with the India-house, incalulably rich, and a man much sought after; his wife was some lady of rank, and he looks to his daughters making, what is called, capital matches. It will be a sad visit, Miss Leslie; but I know your kind heart will not regret it, if I can give her any satisfaction."

Florence assured him she should not, and the Earl added—

"By the way, Florence, was it not in some such office that your poor brother labored so incessantly? Have I not heard you say it had to do with the India trade?"

"Yes; but I never heard him mention Sir William Lennox; I rather think Meynard was the name of his principal employer."

"That may be, and yet it may be the same concern, as Sir William is seldom or never known or seen by his junior clerks."

Interested in Sir Charles's narrative, Florence did not notice this remark. The admiration excited by her brother's

poems was so general, that there was nothing remarkable in a young and suffering girl lingering on their pages till she felt her own soul reflected in them; and her belief that Walter's love was as unreturned as it was unknown, prevented any association of the portrait and Sir Charles's tale.

The following day Sir Charles called for her. She was received kindly by the family, and after a brief delay, conducted to the chamber of the young invalid. Could it be? Florence started in undisguised astonishment; that face—that lovely face, with its faint, beautiful rose, its waving curls of paly gold, through which the brow gleamed forth like ivory, as pure and stainless, she knew it at a glance. Strange—mysterious as it seemed, here lay the lovely idol of the poet's dreams; and those impassioned dreams were in her hand, were treasured next her heart. The deep violet orbs, almost black, from their long dark fringes, fixed their full earnest gaze on Florence, as she entered, and the hectic deepened on her cheek, but she eagerly extended her hand, and faintly murmured—

"This was kind, kind indeed, to come to me so promptly; Sir Charles; will you add to your kindness, and permit me to be alone with Miss Leslie? You know I cannot bear many around me, and they spoil me by indulging me in every thing."

"And so I suppose I must in this, Miss Lucy. Well, well, be it so. I will call for Miss Leslie in an hour."

And so saying he departed. Florence had spoken some kindly words; but for several minutes after Sir Charles had disappeared, the poor invalid kept her hand on Florence's arm, looking sadly and inquiringly in her face; at length she murmured,

"You are not like him, I hoped you would be. Yet he loved you, and Sir Charles has told me how you loved him. Oh, Miss Leslie! bear with me; do not scorn me as a poor, weak, degraded girl. You are his sister, and he is gone; there can be no shame, no sin; I could not whisper it to others, they could not understand me; perhaps they would upbraid me, or think ill of him; and, oh! death were better than that. You think I am raving, delirious; oh, no! no! I am not. They call it decline,

mere bodily disease, but it is not; my heart is broken, and all—all for love of him!"

Whispered as the words were, their agonized tone thrilled to the heart of Florence, who had thrown herself on her knees beside the couch, and was pressing tearful kisses on the damp brow, which had sought its resting place on her bosom, as if the words had burst forth involuntarily, and left her exhausted from their violence.

"You weep," she said, at length, as she felt the hot tears of Florence fall fast upon her cheek; "bless, bless you for those tears; I thought my heart would wear its iron chain of secrecy to the grave; but when Sir Charles spoke of you, and all that you had borne and felt for love of him, my whole soul yearned to pour forth its tale to you. Did he never tell you there was a time when, from the high character his employers gave him, my father had him, day after day, in our house in London to transact some private business? and daily I saw him, for I was privileged, and wherever my father was, his petted Lucy was at his side, and I looked on *his* face, I listened to his thrilling voice, and felt and knew his hidden genius; he haunted me night and day, but I knew not, guessed not how powerfully, till months passed, and I saw him not again, and the longing grew stronger and stronger, till my soul was sick, and my strength failed; and yet I dared not speak it, for neither look nor word betrayed that he had ever thought of me; and then they told me he was ill, ill almost unto death, and never came to his office again. And whom could I ask of him? And months waned, and no one guessed why both my health and spirits sunk till they laid me here. Yet still it seemed I hoped, and then they placed this volume in my hand, and I traced his form! Aye, indistinct as to others that sketch may be, to me it was clear, vivid, expressive of life; and I knew that the poems were his work. But that preface—did it tell his fate? I dared not think it; yet it froze my very life blood. And there was no rest, no sleep, till my father prevailed on Morton to tell the poet's name, and it was *his*. Oh, God! the death-stroke of that hour!"

She broke off abruptly, and Florence felt her right

frame quiver, as if convulsed with inward agony, for several minutes she found not words to answer; at length—

"Would it be joy to think that love returned?" she said, with soothing tenderness; "alas, sweet one! he loved thee too well."

Lucy sprang from her recumbent posture, gazing on that gentle, pitying face, as if to penetrate its truth, and almost inarticulately exclaimed—

"Could I think so! dared I think so! oh, what unutterable joy! But say it, say it again; it is not only to soothe, to console, say that he loved me!"

And briefly and tenderly Florence told all she knew and how she had traced the original of his treasured portrait, the moment she beheld her. The poor girl heard and a burst of passionate tears succeeded, and then a calm so deep, so still, it was as if the soul were already separating from the body.

"Joy, joy for me," were her parting words to Florence, and though the voice was one of utter exhaustion, her eyes seemed to dance in the light of rapture; "joy, such joy, there are no cold barriers to love in heaven. Walter will be mine there, all mine—oh, joy!"

And from that hour, though she sank rapidly, the depression of spirits, the irritability of disease entirely subsided. There was ever a bright smile on her fading lip, a glittering joyousness in her deep blue eye; and so after a few, a very few weeks, she passed away from earth, and none knew the wherefore of that early death, none knew the secret of her love, for Florence felt it a theme too hallowed for mortal ear. Death had consecrated its memory in her own heart, but its knowledge seemed to remove every wish that Walter could return to earth. If there be such love in this cold, perishable world, where bliss has no foundation but the receding sand, and love is born but to die, oh, what must love be in heaven! Is there one longing within us for the good, the pure, the infinite, that is implanted, not to be fulfilled? Has He made all things for good, yet left to dust and ashes the purest, noblest feelings in the heart of man? No, no. Every silent whisper in the heart breathes of immor-

tality, and dearer, more durable than all other is the voice of LOVE.

CHAPTER XXXV.

PRIDE OF BIRTH.—THE SUMMONS.—DEATH OF MRS. LESLIE.

"WHAT is the matter, Frank? you look perfectly *égaré*," inquired Lady St. Maur, as that gentleman joined them one morning in the library. Florence chanced that day to be one of the reading party. "Any shock between your idols —State and Senate? If so, the more play for your powers of eloquent oratory."

"No, no, Lady St. Maur; no public mischance, or your husband would have been the first to tell you. I wonder you have not heard of the domestic tragedy which has so startled me."

"Tragedy!" repeated the Earl; "my good fellow, what do you mean?"

"Something very dreadful, by his looks. Come, Frank, have pity on our curiosity; what is it—suicide for love, or a duel—an elopement, or something more startling still?"

"Nay, Lady St. Maur, it has fairly shocked me out of all jesting. Have you heard nothing of the *exposé* in the Belmont family?"

"Not I; I have not seen Mary or Emily for the last week, and I only hear any thing of gossip from them. What of Lady Belmont? I always imagined her one of the happiest persons in this great aristocratic world, and just now particularly; one of her daughters is engaged to such an excellent young man!"

"Do speak out, Frank," urged the Earl. "What can you have to say about her, which seems so loth to leave your lips? Is she less happy than Ida thinks?"

"Happy! good heavens, my lord! how she can ever have seemed happy, I know not: she is not Lord Belmont's wife!"

"Not his wife! then who in the world is she?" exclaimed the Countess, quite unconscious of the real meaning of his words; but in an instant, cheek, brow, even all

that was visible of her delicate throat, became dyed with glowing crimson, and she continued, indignantly—"It must be all scandal, Frank—the basest, most unfounded."

"I wish it were; but, unhappily, it is a confessed fact, now. Some one whispered it to Arlington, and of course he denied it; vowed that it was false, and went straight to Belmont himself, declaring he must relinquish all claim to Miss Belmont's hand, unless her father gave him some positive assurance of the falsity of the charge. Lord Belmont equivocated, and tried hard to throw him off the scent, when, to the utter horror of both parties, the Baroness threw herself at Arlington's feet, as if to implore his mercy—tried to speak, and fell to the ground in strong convulsions. The whole was of course discovered, and Gerard, in a state of desperation, is gone to the continent, resigning all his pretensions, and his union with such a family is at an end forever."

"The poor unhappy girl!" ejaculated Florence, with the most unfeigned commiseration.

"But what *could* he do, Miss Leslie?" Frank spoke with even more than his usual energy. "Could a man of honor, of reputation, unite himself with one of such dishonorable birth? Could he, with the least particle of feeling either for himself or his children, have acted otherwise?"

"It is too dreadful either to argue or think upon," replied Florence; "but it seems so hard, so cruel, that the innocent should thus suffer for the guilty."

"It is so, yet it is only right," replied Lord St. Maur. "Were it otherwise, remorse might forever sleep, and guilt itself receive no check. Miss Belmont, indeed, demands our commiseration, but poor Arlington not less so."

"He is much less to be pitied, than had this *denouement* taken place *after* his marriage," rejoined Howard "I call him a fortunate fellow in spite of all."

"My dear Frank, you speak as if you had no sympathy whatever with his feelings towards his betrothed: can they be conquered in an hour, think you?"

"Perhaps not. Were I in his place I should be too grateful for my escape from such ignominy to retain any other emotion."

"'He jests at scars who never felt a wound,'" replied Lord St. Maur, half smiling. Frank became more earnest.

"Indeed, my lord, I mean what I say; the more I loved, the more determined should I be upon an everlasting separation in such a case. Could I bear one stigma to fling the faintest shadow on the being I had chosen, or on any one belonging to her? The veriest torture of unconquered love would be preferable to such continued fear; so heaven preserve me from such an ill-fated attachment!"

"Amen! for notwithstanding the harsh sound of your words, they have but too much truth in them," replied the Countess.

"I will not argue on their justice or injustice, for the subject is too painful: dismiss it, pray, and tell us something more worth hearing; I hate the very whisper of such themes."

And so do we, gentle reader; and had not this conversation, trifling as it seems, been absolutely necessary for the clear elucidation of some future portions of our tale, we should have dismissed it altogether.

Who, amongst us, has not felt at one period or another of our mortal career the truth of Moore's beautiful lines?—

"There is a dread in all delight,
A shadow near each ray,
That bids us then to fear their flight
When most we wish their stay."

A sort of quivering happiness, which carries us for the time out of ourselves, sheds a sudden glow of joy over the simplest things—bids us tread the earth as if it had no care nor shade—fills the heart with a kind of elastic buoyancy—makes the eye dance in its light, the voice becomes song in its child-like glee; and yet, in the midst of this, an under-current of sadness makes itself heard for a brief moment, whispering, "This cannot last: banish it ere it bring woe," and then, again, it is lost in the voice of joy; nor is it recalled till some sudden grief quenches the brilliant light, and we feel that intense happiness has but cradled sorrow.

For the comparatively long period of one month, Flo-

rence was under the influence of this strange joyousness. even during its continuance she felt it unnatural; but in spite of all her efforts, she could not dim the sparkling current in which life flowed by; she could not define its source; perhaps she did not ask herself, content alone to feel. Every day seemed in itself a little age of joy. Her pleasures of the evening were enhanced by the recollection of duties satisfactorily accomplished in the morning; the duties of the morning sweetened by the memory of some kindness, some appreciation, or some intellectual improvement of the previous evening; and even a dance could be enjoyed with the elasticity and zest of former years. Her letters from home heightened this enjoyment. Mrs. Leslie had been more than usually suffering, but the last six weeks had seemed so wonderfully well, that she could even walk to the Hall to superintend some new arrangements which Lady St. Maur wished completed. Her very precarious health, the consciousness that the disease under which she labored was indeed incurable, had always been present to the imagination of Florence, ever preventing happiness from being perfect; but now even this seemed to have lost its dread. She could not realize anxiety, though she actually sought it, so fully convinced did she feel that this unnatural happiness could not last, and actually longing for some slight "shadow near the ray," to prevent some greater woe. It was, perhaps, a superstitious feeling, but who has not known its influence?

On reporting Mrs. Leslie's wonderfully improved health, to Sir Charles Brashleigh, he looked so grave, that the Countess became alarmed; and when Florence had left them, he avowed that he did not like the accounts. In a disease like Mrs. Leslie's, such sudden improvements but too often predicted either a fearful increase of suffering, or its termination. Cautiously and tenderly Lady St. Maur, in consequence, entreated Florence not to build too much on the continuance of Mrs. Leslie's present health, proposing that she should go down and spend a week with her mother, that she might judge of her herself, and advise her from Sir Charles not to tax her new-found strength too much. Florence eagerly assented, promising, however, to wait quietly till the morrow's post.

Anxiety thus aroused no longer eluded her grasp, and she counted the hours till the morning's post should come in, turning almost sick with suspense; yet failing in strength to make any inquiry even when she knew the hour had come and past, and no letter had been brought to her as usual. Not ten minutes afterwards the Countess entered, and one glance on her face sufficed for Florence to sink back powerless on her chair.

"You shall set off directly, dearest. Do not look so alarmed. Your mother has had a return of her old attacks, and rather more violently than usual; but it may pass off again as it has often done. My dear Florence, do not let strength fail you now."

"But why has not Minie written to me as usual? Something dreadful has occurred. Oh! Lady St. Maur, in pity do not hide it from me; I can better bear it than suspense."

"Minie was too anxious, my love. You know she is very young to endure any thing like care. Will you promise me to try and be calm, and not magnify evil, if I let you read this letter? Ferrers feared to alarm you, and so very wisely wrote to me."

Florence grasped the letter, struggling to suppress the hysterical emotion which almost choked her as she read. Her mother, it appeared, had not only exerted herself more than usual, in walking to and from the hall, but had also employed several hours in writing; an exercise generally painful. The night before, Ferrers stated, that she had left her mistress at her desk, and retired to her own room adjoining. How long she slept she did not know, but it seemed some hours, when she was awakened by a heavy fall. Startled and terrified, she rushed into Mrs. Leslie's room, and found her extended motionless, and perfectly insensible, on the floor. Several papers were scattered on the table, and the pen was still wet with ink. The fit had lasted several hours; and though she had rallied a little, and appeared sensible of surrounding objects, and Minie's intense grief, every effort to speak had been unavailing, or merely produced unintelligible murmurs. Ferrers concluded by expressing her own fears that she was sinking rapidly.

Florence indeed took in the sense of this hurried letter, but all seemed enveloped in mist, she afterwards said, until she found herself standing by her mother's bedside; but when there, the sight of that dear face, so wan, so altered, seeming as if already fixed in death, the sudden change overspreading her features, as her dim eye caught sight of her child, the convulsive effort for speech, all fixed themselves indelibly on memory; though at the time Florence could only sink on her knees beside her, and bury her face in the bed-clothes.

There was still motion in that death-like form, one hand moved languidly as if to rest on her child's lowly-bent head, and it seemed to the sisters as if that treasured voice breathed articulately—"Florence, my beloved, bless—" Florence started to her feet, and bending over the dying, imprinted kiss after kiss on her lip, brow, and cheek, compelling herself to composure, even while her limbs shook as if they must fail beneath her.

Mrs. Leslie evidently strove to speak, but her voice was so changed as scarcely to be intelligible. "My child, burn—forget—my own, my own—oh God! bless, bless both my children!"—she murmured, with other words, meaningless and strange to those that heard them. But why should we linger on this scene of suffering? Life appeared struggling with death to permit the utterance of something, that would not leave those lips, and death was conqueror; for ere morning dawned all was awful stillness in that heart and frame.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE PAPERS.—THE REQUEST.

The first month of their sad bereavement was spent by the sisters in mournful seclusion, endeavoring to obtain resignation and strength. Theirs had been a more than common trial; for death had come darkly and terribly. Florence could not conquer the fancy that her poor mother had suffered not alone physically, but from the agonizing

wish to say something, for which she had not power. The dying look haunted her, the expression of those dear eyes which, even in death, remained open, till her own hand closed them, seemed to linger on her full of pity, of love, and yet beseechingly, as if they asked that which her lips were powerless to do. Oh! how she longed that that voice had addressed them in its own loved tone once, but once, ere it was hushed forever.

To Minie the horror of that death was such, she could not rally from its recollection. Nervous tremors continually disturbed her night and day. She tried to conquer her feelings, and Florence did all that soothing love could dictate; but for some time all in vain. Lady St. Maur left all the gayeties of London to go down to the Hall, and remaining there a fortnight, spent day after day with the young mourners; seeking, by the truest sympathy and warmest kindness, to alleviate their grief, and even in such a trial it was some consolation to feel they were not utterly friendless and alone.

On examination of Mrs. Leslie's will, her little property, which the success of Walter's work had much increased, was found to be equally divided between her daughters, as were her few trinkets and other personal possessions. It was at first considered, by Lord and Lady St. Maur, that it would perhaps be happier for the sisters to live, as they now could do, independently together; but that if Florence still preferred remaining with them, her home should be Minie's also. Meanwhile Lady Mary Villiers, who had found time and feeling in the midst of her own happiness to sympathize with her favorite, travelled down to the sisters' cottage expressly to persuade Minie to accompany her on a projected tour through Wales and Scotland; assuring her that the change of air and scene would do her more good than any thing. She should be quite quiet, join in no unseemly gayety, as their own family and Mr. Melford composed the whole of the travelling party. Minie felt as if the exertion would be far too painful; believing, as the young are prone to do under sorrow, that nothing could ever make her happy or mirthful again. The earnest persuasions of her sister, the representations of the Countess, the pleadings of Lady Mary, whom

she really loved, at length however prevailed, and she accepted with gratitude the kindness proffered.

Nearly two months after Mrs. Leslie's death, Minie joined her friend. Florence was to return to Lady St. Maur the following week, having still some affairs to settle ere she could leave the cottage; particularly the arrangement of her mother's papers, which task from a peculiarly painful repugnance she had postponed from day to day, and at last resolved not to attempt till after Minie's departure. Ferrers had told her it had been evidently in the very act of writing that Mrs. Leslie's fatal attack had seized her; and there was something on poor Florence's heart which made her turn giddy with emotion whenever she thought of those papers, traced by the hand of the dying, containing perhaps those very words which her voice had not power to pronounce. It was strange, perhaps, that this very circumstance had not urged her to examine them long ere this; but she shrank from the task, vainly endeavoring to define why. Was it presentiment? We firmly believe in the existence of such a feeling, a dim shadow undefinable and vague, and utterly shapeless, yet impossible to be withstood. Florence, however, had too strong a mind to give way to such repugnance. It was the first time she had entered the chamber since her mother's death, and for several minutes she stood upon the threshold, as if she could not pass it; as if death were still there, and hand in hand with desolation, smote upon her heart. It was about ten o'clock in the morning, and the sun shone with mocking brilliance within the rose-trellised casements, and the song of the birds seemed so discordantly gay, that a feeling almost of irritation came upon her. The consciousness of its sinfulness instantly followed, and flinging herself on her knees by the bed, she prayed fervently for submissiveness and strength. Unlocking the escritoire, she drew a table near her, and prepared to look over the papers and arrange them The first page which struck her was evidently that on which her mother's pen had last rested; it was blotted as if the pen had fallen on it, and the last few words were almost illegible. Yet her eye was arrested on them instantly; she read her own name—her mother was

addressing *her*. With a sudden and convulsive movement, she caught up other closely written papers, and looked for their commencement; words seemed to catch her strained gaze, and absolutely rivet it upon them, but still as in desperation she sought the beginning, arranging the sheets consecutively as she did so; and then she read, and her cheek gradually grew blanched, and then her lip, but still there was no movement. Hour after hour passed, and found her in the same occupation on the same spot.

Ferrers was out for the day, and only one other servant, a simple country girl, was in the house. About three o'clock the girl knocked at the door, to say dinner was waiting in the parlor. Florence replied composedly in words, but her voice sounded in her own ears so strangely altered that she looked round in terror, thinking some one else had spoken. Then she deliberately folded up those papers one by one, tied them together, and with them still in her hand, rose from her seat; she made a few steps forward, as if to reach the door, but a strange mist was before her eyes, the room reeled; and when Fanny returned, wondering she did not come, she found her fallen forwards on the ground, to all appearance lifeless. Though much terrified, the girl did all she could think of to restore animation. Sense returned at length, but so slowly, and with so little semblance of life in the marble stillness of Florence's features, that Fanny entreated her to let her run to the Hall, and get them to send for medical advice. Life itself seemed to return with her violent effort for speech to negative this proposal.

"No, no, no," she wildly cried, as she struggled to rise; "send for no one; I shall be well; I am well. Tell no one of this as you love me, be silent and leave me."

She sank back exhausted, but after a few minutes again waved her hand impatiently, and Fanny was obliged to leave her. She returned at intervals, satisfied at length that after a lapse of nearly two hours Florence spoke more like herself. But still, hour after hour passed, and she made no effort to quit the chamber or

the couch on which she lay. Her hands were tightly clasped together, her eyes gazed on vacancy; her lip and eyelid sometimes moving convulsively, as if tears were near, but none came. All was cold, rigid, motionless as stone.

Evening came, and with it the postman, bringing a large packet, directed by the Earl. She opened it mechanically; there was a strange-looking, seemingly a lawyer's paper, and a long kind note from Lady St. Maur. Yet even this last she read many times ere she could understand a single line. At last she became conscious the Countess was alluding to the paper inclosed.

"Do examine it, dearest Florence, and let me know what it is even before you come. The Earl is so very curious, that were it not for punctilio, I believe he would have been tempted to open and examine it; neither he nor I can imagine what you can have to do with lawyer's papers. But I really am unconscionable to ask you to write; I forget you will not receive this till Monday evening, and you come on Wednesday. I shall long for you more than ever. Constance is very good; I look at her with astonishment, and think you a worker of wonders. All my darlings are well; there are many inquiries as to when Miss Leslie will come back. I will not say how much Lady Helen and I miss you, but we all look forward to Wednesday. If that should prove a settlement of marriage from some invisible bridegroom, what shall we do?"

Florence mechanically took up the papers, and broke the seal; but in vain she tried to understand the contents. The very writing seemed illegible, though in reality it was clear enough. Paper and pens were near her, and after having read the closely written letter through three times without comprehending a single word, she wrote a few lines to Lady St. Maur, begging her to excuse the hasty scrawl, as she had been very unwell all day, and still felt confused, which perhaps was her best excuse for entreating Lord St. Maur to examine the papers for her, as she found it impossible to understand them. It was either a mistake, or she was laboring under some strange

delusion. She read her note carefully over, it seemed correct, but she dared not assure herself it was, for a weight of lead seemed crushing all consciousness from her brain.

Night came, and Florence mechanically retired to bed, but there was neither rest nor sleep for her. If for a few minutes she dozed from utter exhaustion, it was to start up again from the most frightful images, to press her hands on her aching temples, and pray that madness might not be her portion, for she felt as if it already were; and the very prayers seemed mockery, for her heart rebelled, and the question, why was she doomed to all this misery? was mentally reiterated till her brain burned and reeled. So passed the night, and so the following day, yet she did all she had power to do. She was so calm, so collected in outward seeming, that Ferrers, though she did think her strangely pale, neither made nor felt the inclination to make any remark.

The evening of Wednesday found her at St. James's, welcomed with, if possible, more than usual kindness by her friends. Lady St. Maur looked unusually arch, as if she had something very delightful to communicate, but Florence scarcely saw it. She had trembled so excessively on first entering the house, that all her energy was roused to control herself, and hide from every eye the anguish which was consuming heart and mind.

"So you actually read that important letter, my dear Florence, without understanding its contents; you really must be more of a simpleton than I have yet believed you,' said the Countess, laughing; "What could have possessed you? I do believe you never even read it."

"Indeed, I did, no less than three times, but I had a stupefying headache all day, and so vainly tried to understand a line," replied Florence, with a slight shudder, which made the Countess look at her more attentively.

"And I think the headache has not left you yet. Why my dear girl, you are looking much worse than when I left you six weeks ago. Florence I fear your time has been more weakly than wisely employed since you have been alone. Must I chide instead of congratulate you?"

"Congratulate!" repeated Florence, in a tone so hollow, it startled even herself. Lady St. Maur put her arm round her

"You are ill, exhausted, dearest; so I must be merciful; perhaps jesting is ill timed, but your letters made me hope that you were recovering the first effects of your sad trial. I am so rejoiced at the contents of that letter, that I fancy you must be equally so; forgetting that independence, even riches may, at such a moment seem of little worth."

"Independence! riches!" repeated Florence, turning her pale face towards the Countess, with a gaze of bewilderment. "What can you mean?"

"Simply, my dear Miss Leslie," replied the Earl, coming forward, and taking her hand kindly, that the letter so perfectly incomprehensible to you, is as perfectly clear to us, and gives me the happiness of informing you, that as the acknowledged heiress of Mrs. Susan Rivers, of Woodlands, lately deceased, you are now the sole possessor of a large estate, and all its appurtenances, with the not inconsiderable addition of seven thousand a year. Will you now try and read Mr. Carlton's letter with the assistance of my notes, and annotations, or believe this truth on my simple word?".

Florence looked almost wildly at the speaker. The words had indeed reached his ear; but the expression of her features was far more of suffering than joy.

"Mrs. Susan Rivers! Woodlands! it must be a mistake She means Flora, Mrs. Hardwicke. I can have no claim," she said at intervals; "dead! when and where, and how is this? Forgive me, my lord; but indeed I can scarcely understand it now."

"Then let me try if I can make it clearer," replied the Earl, sitting down by her, and producing the papers; "it appears, from Carlton's letter, that Mrs. Rivers has been living for the last three years in an obscure village in Wales. The honesty of her steward, however, preserved her estate on such good condition, that combined with her own miserly method of living, her income has materially increased. About a year ago, her steward, at her request, did all he could to find you out, and through her bankers

in London learned at length your destination with us. Your claims upon her seem to have consisted in her vivid remembrance of your unchanging regard and respect towards herself, so long as she permitted you to show it; and another very extraordinary clause, that as you were the only person she had ever known, who had loved and trusted a friend, and yet not been deceived, you must possess some unusual qualities over and above those which had so attracted her regard; and were therefore likely to make good use of and enjoy the wealth which to her had so long been a worthless toy. She therefore bequeaths to Florence Leslie, eldest daughter of Edward and Mary Leslie, the whole of her large possessions both in land and money, with the exception of a few legacies. These are the heads of the lawyer's letter; and having seen him to-day, I have further to tell you, that you are not only an heiress, but an undisputed one. No costs; no lawyer's long bills; nor even any relation of Mrs. Rivers who would be wronged by such a will. Now, then, do you understand, and can you wonder at Ida's astonishment at your non-comprehension of this very important letter?"

"And will you not accept my warmest congratulations, dearest Florence? We know the little worth of mere riches; but we will not abuse them, when they come as now, enabling you to do the good your inclination prompts, and take that station which your birth, talents, and virtues all demand."

"Birth demands! No, no, no; I have no right, no claim; it cannot, cannot be!" exclaimed Florence, so wildly, so incoherently, that both the Earl and Countess looked at her with alarm. "I have no right to these riches; they are not mine. I can have no legal claim."

"My dear Florence, you are bewildered still; and this sudden surprise is too much for you. Try and think calmly; are you not Florence Leslie, the eldest daughter of Edward and Mary Leslie? nay even your birth in Italy is so clearly specified, that there can be no mistake as to your identity. Are you not this very Florence? Do you not love the very name of Italy, rejoicing that it was your birth-place? How I used to smile at your enthusiasm, when I first knew you! Florence, my dear Florence—you

are ill, faint; your journey has been too much for you," she continued abruptly, as she noticed Florence's very lip become white, while her whole frame shivered convulsively; and she only saved her by a quick movement from falling to the ground. Alarmed as they were, still they only considered it the effects of physical weakness produced from contending feelings. She recovered but slowly, and Lady St. Maur, as she bent down to kiss her, merely whispered soothingly—

"Forget every thing that can agitate, or disturb you now, dearest. Only think of our dear Minie, of what you may have the power of doing for her; and even if this unexpected wealth be of little value to yourself, for her sake I know you will soon acknowledge its importance, not alone with gratitude but joy."

"Minie!" repeated Florence, and that name seemed endowed with power to restore her to perfect conciousness; "yes, yes, I have still her to love and cherish, to give back in part all that has been given. Oh, God! oh, God! forgive me; this mercy has not been sent in vain."

Lady St. Maur alone heard these murmured words, and to her they were intelligible enough, as confirming her idea that Florence's emotion was occasioned by the thought that wealth had come too late; those for whose dear sakes it would have been so valuable had passed away, and what then could it be to her? Little could she dream of the cause of that deadly sickness, the wild yearning on that aching heart to flee away and be at rest.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

INJURY FORGIVEN.

THAT night Florence sat alone in her own room, hours, long hours after all other eyes were closed in peaceful slumber; her hair loosed, and pushed from her throbbing brow, as if its weight were insupportable. One thought shone out, clear, distinct, and at such a moment almost maddening in its intensity, from the dead weight of misery

which seemed to have fallen on her. She knew she loved, and one whose own words had thrown an insuperable barrier between them. Why had those words come now, as if written in fire on her brain? What, what could they be to her? He did not love her—it was not his happiness she wrecked; and her bruised heart struggled for quietness, for strength in that one reviving thought. Alas! she overtasked herself. She could not, indeed, recall a word, or tone, or murmur, which could reveal that he felt more than simple kindness towards her; and yet, in all the incongruity of mental torture, she lingered on the idea that she was beloved, and her doom was to wreck his happiness even as her own. And midst these thoughts never once did the recollection of her unexpected inheritance arise, save instantly to be repelled with a loathing shudder, as if, coming at such a moment, it was associated only with misery; while, by an indefinable contradiction, those days of privation and suffering encountered before Lady St. Maur's return, were suddenly transformed to actual joy. Yet all was inward; her whole being rose up against the betrayal of her woe, even in those moments when the burden of that fatal secret seemed too heavy to be borne.

So days passed on. Florence had earnestly entreated the Countess to permit her continuing her former occupations in the family, at least till the year of mourning was at an end; not, indeed, as a salaried governess, but simply because she preferred instructing Constance in her retirement to absolute idleness. In vain the Earl and Countess combatted this resolution. Florence shrunk from the idea of rest and quietness as from appalling spectres, knowing well that nothing but continued occupation could, in any degree chain thought. She had been so happy in that employment, that, by a strange pertinacity, her mind clung to it as if, in giving it up, she loosed another link from the past, and sank yet deeper into the dark abyss of the present. "Let me, only let me still feel myself of use to you," was her reiterated cry; "I cannot live without being of service to any one, as if I were alone upon the earth. Do not, in mercy do not give me time to think!"

The Countess looked at her with astonishment. "You are not speaking like yourself, Florence," she said: "I am sure you are enduring more than you will permit me to know; for such semblance of impatience under trial is not at all natural to you. Granted that I accede to your request, what am I to do next year? I shall only miss your usefulness the more."

"Then seek for some one to supply my place, and let me feel that I am still of real use to you in imparting to her your plans and wishes," replied Florence; and it was strange how clearly, in the midst of this fiery ordeal, her mind retained its energies, as if more effectually to prevent her secret being revealed. Partly to soothe her, and partly to enable her at any time to give up her present determination, Lady St. Maur acceded to her wishes. She further requested the Earl to act for her, in seeing that all Mrs. Rivers' behests were fulfilled. She had an interview with Mr. Carlton; and during the whole dry, business-like details upon which she was compelled to enter, neither intellect nor composure failed. The lawyer was pleased with her acuteness and ready comprehension of all his lengthy particulars. One very important question he urged upon her—would she, or would she not continue Mrs. Major Hardwicke's annuity? It was entirely at her option: Mrs. Rivers having heard rumors of injuries which Miss Leslie had received from that quarter, and wishing her to act with perfect freedom, had expressed no desire herself on the subject.

"You will then have the kindness to treble that annuity," was her instant and unhesitating reply. "And should you ever discover that Mrs. Hardwicke requires more, you will oblige me by instantly making application to me. Above all, let this annuity be made a settlement on her and on her heirs. I do not wish her to feel herself under any obligation to me personally, or give any one the power of withdrawing it."

Mr. Carlton understood her perfectly, and promised compliance. Woodlands was still inhabited; the term, however, of her present tenant would expire within the year of mourning for her mother, and she rather rejoiced

that it would not be vacant for the next few months, as giving her time to think of her future plans. The steward she also saw; and prevailing on him to accept the gift of a rich farm on the Woodland estate, entreated him to be to her all he had been to his former mistress. The old man was rejoiced at seeing her again, and from him she heard many particulars concerning Mrs. Rivers. He told her that she had gradually become more and more infirm, but had rejected every persuasion of himself and her housekeeper (the only two persons she permitted to be about her) to recall herself to her former acquaintances, till, about a twelvemonth previously, she had consented to inquiries being made for Mrs. Leslie's family, but secretly, as she wished nothing to be said of herself until her mind was quite made up as to her future proceedings. After many disappointments, Watson learned all particulars, which, when imparted to his mistress, distressed her exceedingly. She reproached herself painfully for her selfish shrinking from the world, and the useless hoarding of wealth, which judiciously applied, might have shielded Mrs. Leslie and her family from many sorrows. She never rested, after Watson's return, until her will was made in Miss Leslie's favor, speaking of her with more real affection than she had ever been heard to speak of any one, but still persisting in refusing to write and say how ill she was, and how much she really wished for Florence. "No, no," she repeated; "she has found a real friend, and I will not take her from her. She suffered enough from coming to me before: I will not risk her happiness again." Atone for her total neglect of her relatives she said she could not, for she could not bring the dead to life; but she would leave all she possessed to Florence, and her warmest blessing with it.

Watson's every word revealed that Mrs. Rivers's *heart* had dictated the will, and Florence could have no remaining scruple. The Earl and Watson consented to further the young heiress's inclinations on all points, and Lady St. Maur jestingly assured her that, with two such agents, she ought not to permit a single care to sully her unexpected good fortune, prophesying that, little as Florence

seemed to rejoice in it now, there would come a day when she would discover that nearly nine thousand a year was something worth.

Minie's affectionate and artless letters of congratulation would, at any other time, have been sources of unalloyed pleasure; but now, though she spoke and acted as usual, she was, in reality, conscious of but one all-absorbing woe. The mind bore up, but the frame dwindled, notwithstanding all Lady St. Maur's affectionate care: she became paler, thinner, more drooping every week; still the Countess imagined nothing beyond what she saw. If, indeed, she sometimes thought Florence was not quite so "fancy free" as when she first came to her, she also thought and hoped, too, that even there joy was dawning for her. But here Florence puzzled her; her manner had become cold, reserved, if it might be, even proud to young Howard; while his became, each time they met, more respectfully eager, and his attention more decidedly marked. Lady St. Maur would have seriously remonstrated with Florence, but her husband entreated her not. "I have a particular objection both to *making* and *marring* matches, my dear Ida," he said; "and I always find the very best way is to let lovers alone; they always come round at last."

"But though I want them to be lovers, I begin to fear I have built my hopes on air, instead of solid earth," she replied. "I set my heart on this match long ago, and was wicked enough to wish Lord Glenvylle out of the way; for I know Frank himself would never object to marrying a portionless bride. I am certain it was only the idea of his father's refusing his consent which deterred him from coming forward before; and now that Florence is independent as himself, and there is nothing against it, she becomes cold, distant, and all unlike herself."

"But perhaps she really does not like him; and if so, she acts very properly."

"I am very certain that she does love him, as only a girl like that can love."

"And who made you so wise, love?" asked her husband, smiling.

"Woman's wit, and woman's intuitive perception of all

relating to her own sex, my dear husband. I have known Florence too many years not to discover this, although not a word on the subject has ever passed between us. Now, in truth, she puzzles me; for what can make her act so contradictorily?"

"Perhaps she does not like his only coming forward now. She cannot know that he only kept aloof, fearing to expose her to the capricious refusal of his father. It is not at all unlikely, for she has some pride."

"Pride! she has, indeed; and if this should be the case, it would be a real kindness to give Frank a hint, and let him tell the truth. I am half inclined: I do so dislike misunderstandings."

"Take care, my fair diplomatist," was the Earl's laughing reply; "do not spoil all: better let them go their own way."

Whether the Countess followed his advice, or her own inclinations on this important subject, we know not; but certain it is, that not long afterwards, Florence did receive a letter from young Howard, the contents of which were very much as if Lady St. Maur had really given him an explanatory hint.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IS IT LOVE?—THE LIBRARY.—THE DECISION.—TELL ME THIS WEIGHTY GRIEF.

FRANK wrote as he always spoke—to the point, and with feeling. Still, though Florence felt it not, passionate love was wanting. An offer of his hand it certainly was; and a warm allusion to those gentle domestic virtues which, he said, had so riveted his regard, that he felt her acceptance of his love would make him far happier than he had ever yet been. Still, with all this, it was much more an eloquent vindication of what might have appeared interested in his conduct, only coming forward then, than the letter of a lover. He spoke of his father's prejudices; that knowing his consent to their union would never be

obtained while she had been in what Lord Glenvylle termed a dependent position, he having vowed that he would never permit his son's marriage with any but an heiress, he had feared to wreck his own peace and hers; if, indeed, he might hope that she was not wholly indifferent to his suit. He conjured her not to believe him the loving-money, fortune-hunting worldling which he certainly appeared, to put his sincerity to any proof she pleased, but not to judge him thus; concluding by entreating her to show by her manner that evening, whether he had pleaded indeed successfully or in vain.

Meet him that evening! and it depended on herself, herself alone to seal her happiness or misery! The cheek grew paler, more ghastly still; the lip more sternly rigid, and the storm within seemed to crush her as she sat.

"Love me—why, why does he love me?" were her mental words. "Is it not enough to bear my own misery, but I must have his also to endure? But why must this be? Why may I not be his? Who is to know the truth that he has called down upon himself the very evil he forswore? Why should I doom myself to misery? He need never know it." And for one brief minute her features were lit up with the sudden irradiation of joy, yet it was but mocking brilliance. Pressing both hands on her throbbing temples, she called aloud for help and strength. "No, no, I cannot wed him falsely. If I speak, it shall be the truth; and then, will he woo me then? No, no, he cannot, will not; it would but be increase of misery for him and for myself. He can better conquer love, if he believe that he loves alone. Pride will rise up to quell it; he will in time be happy—may forget me. Yes, yes, I will be silent, cost what it may. I care not for myself. Let him be happy, let him forget me, aye, even love another, better, far better than link his fate with mine."

Florence herself knew not the inward fervor of her prayer. She was only conscious that her happiness was in her own hands, and she had decided to cast it from her. She wished to write to him; to tell him how gratefully she felt his uncalled-for explanations, though she could not accept his offer. But in vain she tried to write these simple words. Sheet after sheet she spoiled and burnt,

and gave up the task in despair; and then she thought, could she indeed meet him, and let her manner speak? She dared not trust herself. If she did not appear, would not that be an all-sufficient answer? Hour after hour passed, and she could come to no decision. Again and again the question rose, why did she make this sacrifice? Was it in truth needed, or was she dooming herself to misery uncalled for? Oh! had she but one friend to whom she could appeal; and then the childlike trust and faith of her girlhood seemed to steal over her, leading her to that only Friend who could aid and guide. The power of prayer had of late seemed denied to her, but now an inward voice called her to her Father's throne, and she knelt and prayed almost calmly for guidance, help to do that which his wisdom deemed the best, that which would tend most to future happiness and peace, however dark and troubled seemed her portion now. In after years, she looked back on that hour of prayer almost in awe, for she felt that words had been put into her mouth; she could not of herself have framed them, and with them strength had been infused to preserve her from a doom compared with which her present grief was joy. When she rose, there was strength in her spirit, decision in her heart. She would not see him, and she did not. Resisting all Lady St. Maur's persuasions, even her reproaches, and several messages from the Earl, she remained that evening in her own room.

But her trial was not over. The following morning a message was brought her that Mr. Howard was in the library, and wished particularly to see her, but that he would not detain her long. A sickness so deadly crept over Florence, that the effort either to speak or rise seemed for the moment impossible; but after a few minutes the prayer of the evening rose in her heart, and seemed to give it strength. She descended the staircase, and entered the library; cheek, lip, and brow, vied with the marble in their whiteness, yet not a limb trembled, not a quiver in the voice with which she calmly bade him good morning, as she entered, betrayed what was passing within.

Howard was in appearance the much more agitated of

the two. He tried to say something indifferent, but it would not do, and he plunged at once into the subject which had brought him there.

"I thought," he said, hurriedly, "that I could have waited calmly the answer which I requested, but I overrated my own powers. Lady St. Maur spoke of indisposition as confining you to your chamber last night, yet seemed to think inclination more than indisposition was the cause. That should have been enough, but I could not feel it so, and I came to hear my doom from your own lips, to conjure you to tell me that you will at least acquit me of that mean and petty interestedness which may *appear* to mark my conduct. Speak to me, Miss Leslie; tell me, in mercy, that of this at least you believe my motives free. Presumptuous I may be, but interested! seeking worth only when set in gold!" He spoke passionately, hurrying on as if he dreaded the answer. At length it came.

"Believe me," she said earnestly, "that no thought of such unworthiness could enter my mind, as coupled with one true, kind, honorable as yourself. I grieve that my manner should have caused you to feel one moment's suffering from a thought so groundless. Perhaps it is better that we have thus met, clearly to understand each other. Though wishing to spare myself the pain of apparent coldness to one I esteem so highly, (her voice faltered), I refused last night to meet you, trusting that absence and silence would speak for me."

"Then why, if on this point you so generously and justly acquit me, oh! why, has your manner so changed towards me? Once I dared to hope that the regard I felt was not wholly unreturned, and that you looked on me with a preference to some others around you. Miss Leslie —Florence, dearest Florence! what have I done to change that feeling, or was I indeed too presumptuous, believing that which never was?"

"Pardon me, Mr. Howard, but perhaps had there been no change in your manner, mine would still have been the same. As a friend, whose every act and word towards me was dictated and offered by the most heart-felt kindness could I feel other than regard, esteem, as much above that

which I gave to others, as your high character was superior to theirs? Your manner changed, speaking, as it seemed, of other feelings than those which had at first actuated you. Should I have been right to encourage those feelings when I knew that I might give you nothing in return, except the sincere regard and high esteem which, I trust, under all circumstances, I may be permitted to retain!"

"And with his high esteem, Miss Leslie, have you, can you give me nothing more? Must I teach my heart to forego all its hopes of happiness, all those blissful domestic feelings of which, till I knew you, I was unconscious? May I not look to time to gain me that blessing which I crave; to turn those cold words 'regard, esteem,' to some kinder feeling? Oh, do not condemn me at once to disappointment! Give me at least hope!"

He spoke with emotion, and his was a voice, when in persuasion, difficult to resist; but now it was resisted, and by one whose sinking heart and fragile frame seemed scarcely able to support her many minutes longer.

"Mr. Howard," she said distinctly and slowly, "you must not hope this. I should be guilty of deceit, should I bid you encourage feelings to which I may *never* give return. I am grateful, most deeply grateful for the high regard you must feel towards me, to select me from others so much more worthy. Let me retain a portion of that regard, even while I beseech you to conquer every feeling towards me, which can only create distress. Let us be friends as we have been, Mr. Howard; indeed, indeed it is better for us both, to be—to feel no more."

Frank Howard looked at her with wondering admiration; a strange feeling for a rejected man. Yet if truth must be spoken, he could not understand himself. If, indeed, he was under the influence of passionate love, as he fancied, how came it that disappointment, that unpleasant lowering of self-esteem generally attendant on rejection, did not so oppress him, as to banish all feeling save for himself? It seemed as if the very respect he felt for Florence restrained all inclination to urge his suit. Yet these were incomprehensible emotions to a man who felt that all his hopes were at an end; he tried to define them.

but felt it was impossible. He lingered, gazing on her sadly and silently, for several minutes; then raising her hand to his lips, pressed it strongly between both his own, and said fervently—

"God bless you, Florence; you have spoken kindly, openly, like yourself. I will conquer, if I can, all that can throw a barrier between our continued intimacy. Let us be friends, as you say, and grant me this one proof of your regard. Should you ever need a faithful friend—a brother—let me be that one, trust me without scruple, for no personal disappointment, no individual feelings shall ever interfere to check my interest in your welfare. Once more, God bless you!"

He was gone ere she could reply, and Florence was alone. She made no effort to recall him, but her intense gaze remained fixed on the door through which he passed. She was not conscious of the wild, agonized torrent of thought rushing over heart and brain, save that it felt like waves of molten fire; and then there came a low gasping cry, and her burning forehead drooped on her pale hands, her whole frame shook as if with convulsion. Time passed, but Florence knew it not; all outward emotion had given way to a stillness as of death; her very figure seemed contracted with the soul's agony. A voice at length aroused her; and though it was colder, severer far than its wont, it recalled her scattered senses, and as Lady St. Maur pronounced her name, she looked up.

"Florence, what is the meaning of all this?" she said impatiently. "What can have made you act as you have done? You know of all things, I abhor mystery and caprice. You have told me, or rather your general actions have, that you consider me as your friend; prove that you do so now, and tell me the reason of this extraordinary decision."

Florence endeavored to obey, but though her lips moved, no sound came from them. Lady St. Maur was touched in the midst of her unwonted impatience, and sitting down by her, she said more kindly—

"Now do be the same candid ingenuous Florence you have always been. You know all I mean, for there is only one subject on which you can feel guilty of a proper

want of candor. Make up for it now, and tell me why you have chosen misery, when happiness was offered to you. Frank has just been to bid me farewell, intending to join Lord Edgemere's family in Scotland, instead of telling me that you and he were two of the happiest people in the world. I have wrung the truth from him, that you have refused to accept his love, on plea that you have none to give in return, nothing but cold regard. Florence, I never read woman's countenance rightly, if you have not told him falsely!"

A cry of intense though smothered anguish burst from poor Florence, and she bowed her head on her clasped hands, as if she shrunk from suffering from the Countess's searching look. Lady St. Maur gazed at her with increased astonishment.

"What is this dreadful mystery, Florence? for dreadful it must be to occasion this decision, and your overwhelming wretchedness. I will not believe that you have grown so suddenly ambitious as to reject one like Frank, because you do not think him good enough for your present prospects."

"No, no, no;" grasped Florence, the effort to speak causing her very brain to reel; "Believe any thing, every thing but that! I am not worthy of him, not fit to be his wife, when not the very lowest would wed with me."

"Florence!" exclaimed the Countess; "you cannot know what you say. Not worthy, not fit? When dependent and portionless, your pride might have suggested this, but not now. Even then it would have been absurd, but now it is incomprehensible, quite unlike yourself. I am certain that you love him. You neither can, nor dare deny it."

"It is because of this; because I love him, that I would not link his fate with mine. I care not for myself; it seems easy to die; but for him,—no, no! I love him all too well."

"Will you gratify me by speaking comprehensibly, my dear Florence? because you certainly do mystify me more and more. If you wish me to retain my good opinion of you, and desire our mutual confidence to continue, speak out. I cannot continue regard towards one who, pro-

fessing friendship, fails in its most important duties—sincerity and confidence."

Lady St. Maur's temper and patience very seldom failed her, except in cases like this. She could not feel for Florence, because the real truth was so completely unsuspected, that she could not frame any reason for Florence's mysterious conduct, and still more mysterious words. It appeared to her that she had chosen misery instead of happiness, for some very unfounded cause, some fancied injury to her proper pride by Frank's holding back so long, that she had worked herself into the idea of a necessity for self-sacrifice, to which the Countess fancied her exceedingly prone, and was now suffering the consequences of her own delusion. Florence withdrew her hands from her brow, and looked up in Lady St. Maur's face.

"Cannot continue regard without sincerity and confidence," she murmured, more to herself than to the Countess. "I did not dream of this. But perhaps it is better; I have no right to conceal the truth from her, but yet, to lose all at once—love—friendship, to find myself an object of scorn, instead of love, oh! how may I bear it?" and again a strong convulsion bowed her frame.

Some sudden revulsion of thought brought before Lady St. Maur, at that moment, several trifling circumstances, unnoticed at the time, which now congregated to convince her as with a flash of intelligence, that there was more real meaning in Florence's wild words and agonized manner than her first irritation had supposed. In an instant she remembered also that all this had been since Mrs. Leslie's death, and Florence had, in fact, been unlike herself ever since. What the mystery could be, in truth, she guessed not; but her words rushed back upon her as cruel and unjust, and throwing her arm caressingly round the unhappy girl, she drew her closer to her, saying in her own natural voice—

"Forgive me, my own Florence, I have been very cruel, feeling more for Frank than for you. Even if I think you wrong, or at least unwise to continue this strange mystery, I have not tried the kindest way to solve it. Will you forgive me, and trust me too? It must be

some terrible secret to move you thus," she continued, becoming really alarmed, as the sofa actually shook beneath Florence's tearless sobs. "Yet give it words, dearest; do not let it lie on your heart and break it. You can have nothing to tell which will change my love. Sorrow and evil are always magnified unless revealed. Come, tell me this weighty grief, my Florence, and try if I have not power to dissolve it into air."

"No, no, not this! no one on earth can remedy this!" she wildly reiterated, starting from Lady St. Maur's detaining hold, and standing erect before her. "Fit wife for him whose own lips vowed that he would rather bear the anguish of unconquered love, than wed with infamy; that his wife must have no stain, no, not even a mother's! and knowing this, might I wed him, when the truth seemed revealed but to save him from misery. No, no, I have prayed to die ere the words were spoken; but I live, breathe, feel still, and they must be said. Fit wife for him! I, who have no name, no rank; who know not what I am, save that I am not Florence Leslie! Not Mary Leslie's child! Naught—naught—but a child of—of—"

Sense, motion, strength, all failed with the convulsive effort, and she fell forward powerless at Lady St. Maur's feet

CHAPTER XXXIX.

DESPAIR.—THE FRIEND TRUSTED.

When Florence recovered, she found herself laid on her own bed, partially undressed; Alice holding some strong essence which had evidently been used, and the Countess plentifully bathing her temples and hands with cold water. For nearly a quarter of an hour Florence seemed hovering between sense and unconsciousness, aware that Lady St. Maur and Alice were near her, but unable to define the cause of her sudden illness. She had often fainted before, but it seemed to her never so pain-

fully as then; and the difficulty to regain sense, power, and thought, never was so overwhelming. Her head felt as if bound to the pillow by weights of lead; with an incessant throb, and burning of the temples, accompanied by sharp pain. Still the mind would work; the efforts to think never relaxed; and amidst the dark, formless mist which enveloped her brain, there felt one indefinable but unconquerable sense of pain. Her eyes closed upon the light, as if it wrung the mind to deeper torture, till Lady St. Maur bending over, said in accents of the deepest feeling—

"My poor girl, my own Florence, do you not know me? Will you not speak to me?"

The voice recalled her terribly to life, and all—all which had passed; the *cause* of that faintness, the misery which was not alone upon her now, but hemmed her in as by a wall, whence there was no escaping, no retreat. Her eyes opened, and her lips moved; but only a strong convulsion contracted her features. The Countess made a sign to Alice to leave them, and Florence seemed partially relieved by her departure, but still she did not speak; it was only the despairing, yet imploring gaze, which betrayed thought had regained its sway. For several minutes Lady St. Maur felt as if she could not address her. Every usual suggestion of comfort seemed irrelevant to grief such as this. She could only press her lips caressingly on her burning brow, and chafe her hands within both her own.

"Florence! dearest Florence! Do not look upon me thus," she said at length, her own tears falling fast as she spoke. "Speak to me; surely there must be some mistake, and you are laboring under some strange delusion. What foundation, what proof can you have, after so many years?"

"It is truth," murmured Florence, and though her voice was hollow it was perfectly distinct; "a mother's dying words, a mother's dying hand affirmed it. A mother; oh, God! she was not my mother! I was not so blessed."

"She was your mother in affection—in all which makes that precious tie, my Florence! Do not add to the agony

of this moment by darker thoughts than need be. Think how she loved, cherished you."

"Would—would that she had not thus loved me, but left me to die with her who gave me birth, I had been spared this moment!" wildly and despairingly burst from Florence's parched lips.

"Do not say so, my sweet girl; it is wrong, it is sinful, even in agony such as this, to give way to despair. Think on the blessing you have been—aye, and may still be."

"Still be!" reiterated Florence, "to whom! Who is there will love me—associate with me, now? An outcast, abandoned; with a stain that who can bear?"

"I will, replied the Countess, frankly and unhesitatinlgy. "Florence! can you think this unlooked-for misfortune is to throw a barrier between you and me? It shall not, even if all must be proclaimed. But can there be any cause for you to abandon a name which you have so long and nobly borne? You are not well enough to tell me all, or I would entreat you to confide in my friendship, and let me think for you."

"I will—I will, if I can; but, oh! forgive me," she exclaimed, half rising and clasping Lady St. Maur's arm with passionate eagerness, "check me, stop me, if I say aught madly; I do not mean it. I would not say it; but there have been times when I felt as if I were going mad—and now it is stronger than ever!" and she sunk back almost exhausted; but, after a few minutes, faintly resumed:—

"In the private drawer of my desk is the M. S. Read it; do what you will. But, oh! do not let it"——

"Hush, dearest! I will not hear such words. Your confidence, indeed, I accept; and, trust me, it shall not be misplaced. But my husband"—she paused, evidently anxious, and Florence became again fearfully agitated.

"Yes—yes, it must be; I will not burden you with anything that must be kept from him. Tell him all you will, I will risk even the agony of being forbidden to associate with you; for I know he will not think as you do."

"I know him better, Florence. Try and banish such miserable thoughts. For my sake, for Minie's, endeavor

to be calm; to hope that all may not be as wretched as it seems. I know that at this moment all I say seems vain worse than vain, almost cruel; but, oh! trust to a God of love, my Florence! You shall be happy yet."

"Happy!" repeated poor Florence, with an irrepressible shudder. "Not in this world. God forgive me, and bless you for all you would do! aye, and for all you feel! If I am ill, if I cannot tell you then, do not let Minie know; keep it from her. Let her still believe me the sister she has so long loved. I cannot break every link at once."

Her voice became fainter, and utter exhaustion followed. Lady St. Maur promised all. But vainly Florence struggled to be calm. Agony such as hers mocks at will, and hour after hour of that dreadful day passed, leaving her with alternate fever and exhaustion.

Every precaution was taken, but before night Lady St. Maur watched over her, as she struggled in all the paroxysms of delirium.

The Earl and Countess had been engaged that day both for dinner and the evening. No one enjoyed such things more, when happiness was around her, for there was that in her own noble heart and happy temper which reflected itself on all around, and ever enabled her to cull flowers when others saw but weeds. But when aught of suffering appealed to her for sympathy, scenes of revelry were relinquished, not only without a sigh, but simply because she could *not* join them. This day finding it even more than usually impossible, she succeeded in persuading her husband to go without her; entreating him to wait the solution of Florence's sudden illness and its effect on her till he returned.

Finding that Florence had sunk into the heavy slumber of a powerful opiate, and that even when awake she could do nothing for her—for the poor girl was now unconscious of her presence—Lady St. Maur left her to the united care of Alice and Ferrers, and retreated with the important manuscripts to her own boudoir. It was near midnight, but she had determined not to retire to rest till her husband's return, and took advantage of that hour of quiet to become acquainted with the real cause of Flo-

rance's deep agony, still hoping that all was not so dark as it seemed. At first she had felt half indignant at the long concealment on the part of Mrs. Leslie; but the feeling did not last. She could well understand how, loving her as she did, she should shrink in anguish from inflicting a shock so terrible. But why then reveal it at all? It surely could not be needed, and she thought the act of doing so misguided and cruel. Many things in Florence, since her mother's death, returned to her mind, and Lady St. Maur felt that while she had that terrible secret to conceal she might bear up; but once revealed, she should sink powerless beneath it. And Frank Howard too! Lady St. Maur actually shuddered as she pictured the interview between them. Yet she could not blame the sacrifice; she should not believe it under the circumstances uncalled for. Howard's sentiments had been too lately, too powerfully expressed to admit a doubt as to his course of acting, if the truth were known; and as such it was far better that Florence's ill-fated love should never be revealed. But Florence! even if she had only this with which to contend, what misery must be her portion; and, oh! how nobly, how admirably, she had acted up to the promise of her girlhood! The happiness of those she loved *was* dearer than her own.

It was with tearful eyes the Countess took up the manuscript. The hand had evidently trembled in its task, for here and there words were illegible, but as a whole, the sense was clear and continued. The mind of the writer had evidently never failed. We might give a brief sketch of the contents, but our readers may better enter into Florence's feelings by following Mrs. Leslie's words.

CHAPTER XL.

MRS. LESLIE'S MANUSCRIPT.—THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

"FLORENCE, my beloved one!" so that important letter began—"I know not when, or indeed, if ever, your eyes will rest upon these words; yet there is that upon my

heart urging, impelling, nay, commanding me to write that secret which has dwelt with me, for nearly three and twenty years, sternly forbidding me to bear it with me, as my love would dictate, to the grave. I have sought to disobey that inward voice; but it haunts me still, like tones from another world, and as if sin, and suffering, and horror would rest on its disobedience. I must obey. I have prayed that our God would, in his great mercy keep this dread secret unrevealed, unless its concealment threatened deeper agony than its betrayal; and still, oh still, he may grant my prayer! I will write the truth; and if His wisdom bids it be revealed, Florence, my child, believe He wills it for some secret, yet important good, to spare yet deeper woe. But I must be calm. I thought to have conquered all of earth, to have buried its wild, passionate yearnings in my Walter's grave; but when I think of you, my Florence, I know that feeling is unconquered still. The years of devoted love you have lavished on me, and on my children, the lisping endearments of infancy, the willing obedience, the fond affection of your youth, the blessings you lavished upon our home in the hours of trial—when I recall these things, Florence, what right have I to break the sweet delusion which I myself have fostered in your heart? How dare I breathe one word, which would whisper that no tie of nature bound us? God of mercy, spare me this! I cannot, cannot inflict such misery on my child!

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"I was very ill after writing the above, my Florence, and it seemed as if, indeed, this dreaded trial would be spared me; but once more I have rallied, and again I hear that spiritual voice urging me on. Let me write then, ere strength and calmness again fail. You know I was very young when I lost my mother; my father then placed me at school, thinking he better insured my comfort and happiness than his taking me with him abroad. I never saw him again for five years afterwards; he died abroad. A distant relation, but our only family connection, who had been with him in his last moments,

came to England and took me to live with her, making no difference between me and her own child. From that hour I should have been perfectly happy, had not my friend had griefs and trials, which I could not witness without sympathy. She was an English woman by descent, but Italian by birth, and had also married an Italian, and had lived the greater portion of her life in Italy, long enough to regard it, indeed, as her own country, more particularly as it had been the birth-place of her only child—a daughter, and the scene of an unusually happy wedded life. It would be a long and tedious task, my Florence, to dilate on all she did for me; suffice it that she bound me to her with such strong ties of veneration, gratitude, and love, that I felt as if even the devotion of a life could never adequately repay her. For her I felt I could do little, but I made a secret and solemn promise, that to her daughter I would endeavor to return, in part all I owed herself; and this seemed an easy task; for Madeleine, in spite of faults which wrung her mother's heart with foreboding misery, was, in truth, one to cherish and caress, to feel that her very failings excited no common love. She was my senior by two years; endowed with a vivacity, an intelligence, and beauty, that would have made me feel almost painfully her inferior, had she not loved me as fondly as I loved her—nay, she would listen to my representation: my influence would often lead her repentant and sorrowing to her mother's neck, when all the good advice of our worthy governess had been without effect. Essentially Italian, a very child of impulse, she could not be indifferent—she either loved or hated. Few could understand her, even amongst those she would have loved: and therefore was she continually disappointed, continually mortified, till haughtiness and pride at length kept her aloof from all, except ourselves. Lovely she was, but it was not the loveliness of our more northern clime. The large, dark, soul-beaming eye—the clear, olive complexion—the luxuriant tresses of raven hair—the lip, so full of sentiment and love, that even when her eyes were closed, the face retained its exquisite expression—such

she was, in feature as in character, a daughter of that land in which the blood cannot flow as calmly as in less sunny shores.

"Florence, my child, is there none to whom these traits of feature (not of character) seem applicable, even as to Madeleine? Know you of none whom they might, with equal force describe? Alas! my child, my pen still shrinks from its task, and lingers on these minute particulars, as if it would not pass to those so much more important to us both.

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"When Madeleine was about nineteen, some affairs respecting her late husband's Italian property recalled Madame Montoni to Italy. I was of course to accompany them; but my quiet tastes were peculiarly English, and I shrunk almost in pain from residing in other lands. Not so Madeleine. Though only thirteen at the period of her quitting Italy, her love for her native land amounted almost to a passion. She was never weary of expatiating on its varied charms, alike of nature and of art—the warm feelings of its inhabitants, the glow of poetry and love, which (girl as she was) she described as existing there in contradistinction to what she termed the coldness, the worldliness, the heartlessness of England. I could not understand the wild flights of her vivid imagination, but my own quieter love for my English home enabled me to bear with her, and give her the sympathy she craved. With these associations, loving her and her angel mother as I did, do you wonder any longer, my beloved child, at the sadness which your passionate longings to look on Italy once occasioned? Alas! I know it was nature that spoke, and I have looked upon you, at such times, till the agony of recollection seemed too heavy to be borne.

"We went to Italy. The Montoni estates lay in the neighborhood of Rome, and that city alternately with Florence became our residence. Madeleine had not been introduced in England, but now entered with avidity into the delights of society, which was, indeed, fascinating, including all the highest Italian families, with many English visitants of first-rate rank and talent. It was at

this time that Madame Montoni's anxieties for Madeleine redoubled. Surrounded by adulation and gallantry, by all that has power to shake even the steadiest—and she loved these things—she laughed at her mother's fears, declaring that not one of those whose devotion she permitted—nay, enjoyed—had power over her heart—that the pleasures of her present life were far too agreeable, to permit a thought of her changing them for the quieter enjoyments of a wife. In vain her mother remonstrated that she was acting wrongfully, cruelly, in permitting, as she did, the attentions of one for a time, and then remorselessly forsaking him for others who pleased her more. It was her pleasure, she said, and could do no harm, for every one must be accustomed to her now. I could perceive the anxiety of my beloved friend, and she made me the confident of her many fears. My heart was often wrung by the tears I have seen her shed, under the painful belief that her child's very affection for and confidence in herself were lost in the wild turbulence of spirit which these exciting pleasures caused. Her impulse was to return to England; but affairs of importance still detained her in Italy, and Madeleine had petulantly declared —and we knew her too well to doubt her—that, rather than return to England, she would give herself away to the first who offered, and dare all the miseries of an union without love. Still we loved her; she riveted our affections as by a spell, and we could but pray that true affection might, in time, be excited, and tame those restless spirits, and that love of universal sway, into devotedness to one. She did really love at length, and madly, passionately, as was her nature. It was strange, with her avowed hatred to every thing English, that it should have been by an Englishman that all the deep, fervid feelings of her character were called forth! But Charles Neville possessed few of the quiet unpretending marks of a genuine English gentleman. Eminently handsome, fascinating in manner, and combining all the attractions of solid education with elegant accomplishments, he became the leading star of every circle at the capital, obtaining with neither the rank of birth nor of decided talent, the suffrages of all.

"Unlike any other who had before bowed down to her,

Madeleine's curiosity was first excited towards the stranger and then quick, impetuous, as every other impulse, the rushing torrent of her love. She believed it returned, and so did all those who saw them together. But Madame Montoni herself was not aware of the extent of Neville's admiration and devotion. She was at that time in declining health, and Madeleine joined society under the care of a female friend. I was also to have been introduced, but I preferred remaining with my benefactress—a resolution she permitted the more willingly, as Edward Leslie, afterwards my beloved husband, was almost always with us, and our affections mutually engaged.

"Madeleine was strangely silent at home upon the attractions of her new admirer. It was this fact which first made me believe she really loved him, and I tried to obtain her confidence, but, for the first time, it was refused me. 'You cannot understand me,' was her reiterated answer. 'Your feelings, even in love, are all too calmly happy—too unimpassioned, for the comprehension of mine. Be satisfied, that I can never again be the girl I was.'

"I imparted my thoughts on the subject to my friend: but she did not think much of them, believing it scarcely likely, with Madeleine's peculiar feelings, that an Englishman would eventually be her choice.

"About this time, I know not how they first arose, but rumors were afloat greatly to the discredit of Mr. Neville At first they were unheeded; his influence, his many fascinations retained the more powerful ascendency. But, at length, reports became certainties; positive proofs were collected (at least so it was alleged) that Charles Neville was not his real name—that he had been traced through many of the Italian cities as a man of the most dishonorable practices—that many a domestic circle had been plunged into misery by his means; with other charges equally base, and perhaps equally unfounded, for, terrible as were the consequences of his introduction to our family, we have learned little of him even to this day. Several of Madame Montoni's confidential friends informed her of these rumors; but Madame Montoni did not credit all she heard. She knew the malignant

influence of envy towards all who had ever been made the star of fashion; still she did her duty; she refused to permit her daughter to meet or associate with him, unless he came forward with decided proofs of innocence. Never can I forget poor Madeleine's look when this command was given; but she uttered no word of either assent or refusal. I saw that she rejected, without the smallest reservation, all the reports against him; and every kindly feeling towards those who dared to mention them turned into contempt and hate. Once, only, I ventured to speak on the subject, but she silenced me at once. 'Mary, if you would not have me hate and despise you, as I do others, breathe not this fool's tale. I could better doubt my own life than his worth and honor. Do not attempt to read my heart; you cannot. I would love you still; then, oh! do not you, too, seek to reason with me.' And for one brief minute she threw herself on my neck, in a convulsive passion of tears; but there was never again any visible interruption to her extraordinary calmness: her whole character, indeed, was changed. From being impetuous and self-willed, even in trifles, she became cold and calm. She no longer sought the scenes of pleasure, once enjoyed with so much avidity. To indifferent persons she was haughtier than ever; to her mother and myself more softly and gently affectionate. To me it was so evident that she was under the influence of some one overwhelming passion, that even now it appears strange that by her mother the real fact was unsuspected.

"Neville quitted Rome; at least so it was supposed, for by none but our poor Madeleine was he ever seen within the city again, and soon afterwards Madame Montoni removed her establishment to Florence. We had not been there long before an Italian of high character, attracted by Madeleine's surpassing beauty, paid her attentions too marked to be mistaken. She did not perhaps encourage, but certainly did not repulse him. Her poor mother rejoiced, but I could only feel uneasy; convinced that Madeleine still loved Neville, I feared—oh, how forebodingly!—that her present conduct was but a veil, concealing other and far different resolutions. After a reasonable time the Count made his proposals for her to

her mother, conjuring her to plead his cause: she did so, and Madeleine, with the same unfaltering composure signified her acceptance, throwing an impassable barrier between her own feelings and her mother's affectionate sympathy. checking the one effectually by her determined concealment of the other. Not a fortnight afterwards, Madeleine disappeared, leaving no trace of her path, no clue by which she might be followed; nothing but a note, undiscovered in the confusion, and not found till some days afterwards. I have preserved it; it was simply this:—

"'Mother, it is over. Before you receive this I shall be the wife of Charles Neville; and without one doubt, one fear, do I become so. I believe not one tittle of the charges brought against him; he holds my fate, and I *must* be his alone. All existence, save his love for me, and mine for him, is burnt up within me. I would weep for the grief this decision will cause you, my mother, but I cannot; I would ask you to forgive me, but I cannot feel that I have done aught to need forgiveness. You laid a positive command on me never to speak with him again, a command impossible to be obeyed, and therefore I have spared all needless altercation, deeming it better tacitly to acquiesce than to excite arguments which could easier shake the ocean rock than Madeleine. For him who sought my hand I told him I had no heart to give; yet he persisted, and he is fooled according to his folly. I can spare no further thought for him; all, all are concentrated in my husband. His fate is mine; be it ignominy or honor, I glory thus to share it. I know not our home. He is a wanderer, and long years must pass ere we meet again. Forget me; I was never, never could be, the friend, the comforter to you that Mary is. Let her be now your only child; give her the love you lavished but too fondly upon me. God bless you, mother, too good, too fond for one like me. 'MADELEINE.'

"It was enough; Madame Montoni sunk beneath it. Every inquiry, every effort was made to discover some traces of the fugitives; but all was vain. My wedding-day had been originally fixed in the very week of Made-

leine's flight, but of course it was postponed. After three months, however, Madam Montoni would not permit a longer delay; she said she had no wish in life but to see us united, to feel that I was happy, and would be loved and cared for when she was gone. And we were married according to her wish; she bore up a few weeks longer, and then sank, her child's name (coupled with forgiveness and with blessing) the last word upon her lips. Her death, and the lingering anxieties for Madeleine, whom I still loved with unchanging affection, were heavy clouds on the dawn of our wedded life.

"We were anxious for the calm, quiet joys of England, yet neither regretted that my husband was unavoidably detained in Italy, still hoping that we might yet receive tidings of Madeleine. I saw that Edward feared more even than he expressed, and the sweet promise of an addition to our domestic happiness, in the birth of a child, could not make me happy or at rest. At length the longed-for tidings came. It would have been difficult for any one less intimately acquainted with my poor friend's writing to have recognised it, in the almost illegible scrawl, but for me the wording alone was sufficient. And oh! even now the agony that brief note caused returns in all its force.

"'Mary,' it ran, for I have it now before me, 'Mary, he has betrayed me! It was all true, the tale they told. Oh God! oh God! that I should live to say it. Yet still I loved him, aye, so loved him, that though I knew him guilty, miserably, unredeemingly guilty, I clung to him, worshipped him still; I would have done so yet; I would have followed him wherever his wild will led; I would have been faithful, loving, to the end: but he has trampled on me, scorned, betrayed, forsaken me, laughed at my mad folly in so loving him; sneered at the weak credulity which believed in his truth and worth; and more, he has dared assert that our marriage was null and void, a mere mockery of form; that I have NO claim on him; that he has done by me as by many others, deceived, betrayed, and left to die. Die! I WILL NOT die till my unborn babe is righted, till I have *proofs* that the marriage was

not false. I know it was not, and he knows it also; for he has quailed before me in the utterance of his foul lie. I will traverse Italy till I have discovered the priest who united us, till I have proofs that I am not the foul thing he, even he, the merciless betrayer, has dared to term me. Mary, I WILL do this; you know me; I shall not fail. And when it is done, when my child is cleared from aught of stain, I will come to my mother's grave, (*he* told me I had killed her,) come to her grave and die!'

"Florence, my child, will *you* read this unmoved? Has it no deeper voice than the mere narrative of one now gone? Alas, alas! I dare not hope it. Nature will have voice. My child, my blessed child, believe those words, believe them as I do, as I have ever done, that she was *not* deceived, but the villain foiled himself.

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"Again I have been ill, my Florence, but am once more permitted to resume my task; I would not end it as above—I would conclude—conceal these papers where naught but a special Providence can bring them to your eyes. I am not weakly superstitious; I believe in neither fate nor chance, but I do believe that a Father's arm is around us; that a Father's love will spare my child all needless woe; and, if it be not for a special good, will permit these papers to remain unseen forever.

"The emotions caused by that dreadful letter occasioned premature confinement. I was very ill some weeks; but my child, a girl, though weakly, promised to survive. But for Madeleine, what could we do? The letter bore no date, no place of residence; the post-mark was obliterated—all seemed a dark, shapeless mystery, which no effort could solve. We were then at Rome, and the wisest plan appeared to be, to return to Florence, and there wait (making every possible inquiry meanwhile) my poor friend's appearance; I never doubted she would come. Though her intentions with regard to the curé who had married them were vague and undefined, I knew her so well that I felt convinced she would persevere in finding him, and hoped she had more perfect intelligence of his abode than her letter revealed.

"To Florence then we determined on returning, as soon as my strength would permit; but so greatly had my health been shaken that it was full ten weeks after hearing from her ere we set off. My child of course accompanied us, and one female attendant who had long been in Madame Montoni's service, and was faithfully attached to us all. About the middle of the second day's journey my poor babe was suddenly taken ill. No house or village being near, we proceeded as rapidly as possible, hoping to reach some town where medical aid might be procured. Speed, however, for my infant was of no avail; she expired in my arms before evening fell, and just as we reached a miserable looking house near the source of the Arno. My husband saw that assistance for our child was indeed vain; but being greatly alarmed for me, he determined, if he could but procure a comfortable room, to remain there that night instead of going farther.

"The hostess received us kindly and hospitably, but declared she hardly knew how to accommodate us, as the only good room she had was occupied by a lady who had only been confined three days, and was very ill indeed; adding that the poor lady was quite alone, and she thought something was wrong in her mind, she looked and talked so strangely. Much more she might have said, but I heard her not; a new and terrible emotion roused me from the stupor which had fallen on me; strength, mental and bodily, seemed suddenly restored in the thought that Madeleine, my poor Madeleine was found, and needed me. I flew to the apartment pointed out as hers—I stood beside the miserable couch, and one glance sufficed me. Notwithstanding the awful change from blooming health to the hues of death—for at first I thought she was gone forever—I recognised my beloved and suffering friend. She lay as if unconscious, save that her arm clasped her child who was sleeping in all the peace of infant slumber, its little head cradled on the bosom which had naught but love to give.

"'Madeleine,' I shrieked, as I threw myself on my knees beside her, and pressed the thin cold hand again and again to my lips; 'Madeleine, friend, sister; speak to me but one word; tell me you know me—love me.'

"My wild words recalled the departing soul; her eyes opened, fixed themselves on my face with such a glare of inquiry, of hope struggling with doubt, that I could scarcely sustain the gaze; and then she sprung up; she threw one arm convulsively round my neck, and the wild, sharp, agonized accent of her voice thrills on me now.

"'Mary—Mary—Mary!' she reiterated; 'God has brought you—none but He, to save, love—my child, my child—no stain, no shame. I have—' and her voice was lost in a gurgling rush of blood, streaming from mouth and ear and nostril; her head drooped, her arm sunk powerless—a few minutes, the rushing torrent ceased, and all was still.

"I know not how long I remained kneeling motionless beside the couch, gazing as if fascinated on the countenance of the dead, gleaming forth in such ghastly whiteness from the dark lurid stains which had dyed the linen all around her. I heard not my husband's voice, nor knew that he stood beside me. It was the feeble wail of an infant which aroused me; bewildered and feverish, I imagined it the voice of my own child, and snatched it to my bosom; its little face and hands and dress were dyed with its mother's blood. Fearfully, hurriedly, I removed those unseemly stains, clothed it in clean, refreshing garments; and then I gave it food, its natural food; and as it eagerly and helplessly clung to my breast, as I felt its little head nestling against me as my own poor babe had done, sense and energy returned in a passionate burst of tears.

"Night came. They had removed all that was horrible from the chamber of death; and side by side they had laid the dead, my infant and my friend. All but my own maid believed them mother and child; and there was no need to dispel the illusion. That night, as I looked upon the innocent babe so strangely, so providentially thrown upon my care, the sole record of those I had loved with a daughter's and sister's tenderness, who appeared made mine to fill up the void which my poor babe's death had wrought; as I felt how utterly it was dependent upon me, nay, mine in all save life itself, I knelt before my hus-

band, I conjured him to let me call it ours, to fold it to our hearts in lieu of the infant taken from us; like her it was a girl, and whoever its father might be, we robbed it, by adoption, of no legal heritage. It was indeed a weighty boon, though at the moment I knew not its extent; I only saw the struggle in my husband ere he could grant it. He bade me reflect on all I might draw down upon myself—we knew nothing of its father, but that he was a man of sin; we knew not even if its birth were legitimate. He bade me ponder well, if, should we have other children, I could still bestow on our adopted one the same love. It needs not to repeat all that passed between us. It was evident his only objection was its doubtful birth, and the evil passions it might inherit from both its parents. Even after a long struggle, and he had granted my boon, and granted it in such a manner as tenfold to increase the love and esteem I bore him, he still wished me to bring up the child as an adopted one, *not* as my own, fearing the effect of concealment and deception on my own heart. But at such a moment I could not realize this fear—I could not believe that aught of misery or remorse could spring from a deception only acted to secure the happiness of an innocent being committed to my care. And even in this my generous Edward at length acceded. And in after years, when in your deep yearnings for Italy, your love for all that was high and noble in art and poetry, there I traced your mother's nature, and trembled lest similar sufferings should be yours; when I saw you quitting the child, for the high-souled loving girl, and I thought on all woman's trials, and dark forebodings and remorseful fears crept over me, bidding me dread I knew not what. Never once did my beloved husband upbraid me for having acted contrary to his advice; nay, he could not share my fears; for when I was tortured by the feeling that, even to secure your happiness I had done wrong—that there was actual sin in forfeiting the straight line of truth, he soothed me by the assurance, which I could see he felt himself, that I had done right—I had secured the happiness of our adopted, and given him a treasure blessed and blessing as his own children. And so we both felt, my Florence. Every year that passed bringing forth new virtues, new qualities to

endear. We blessed God for you, my child, as for our others; aye, and bless him now, for what have you not been to us? how blessedly have you repaid our cares! Are you not ours still? Minie has been the breast to nourish, the hand to guide, the lips to train. Florence, my beloved, my own, oh! think of me, call me your mother still.

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"My strength is waning, my sweet child. With increase of difficulty my pen resumes its task.

"By my poor Madeleine's dying words, it seemed to us that she must have obtained some positive proof of the legality of her marriage, and was in possession of papers to that effect. Greatly to our disappointment, however, not any such could be found. The hostess reiterated her assurances that the poor lady had brought nothing with her, and as there could be nothing in a bundle of papers to tempt cupidity or falsehood, we were compelled to believe her. My husband, I saw, imagined poor Madeleine's words the mere excitement of her own belief. I could not think this, and still believe she had foundation for her assertion. There was no need of a bribe to persuade our hostess to declare, if any inquiries should be made, that the poor infant had died with its mother; for she herself believed it was so. I know not if such inquiries were ever made, for we never saw the vale of Arno nor its inmates again. Our own maid, the only participator of our treasured secret, was too faithfully attached to us and to the poor child ever to divulge it. Even in her marriage, (for she married soon afterwards, and went to France,) to the hour of her death, it never passed her lips. We stayed another year in Italy, and then returned to England. Walter and Minie were successively granted us, and the love you bore them, the constant sacrifices of your own childish pleasures to enhance theirs, only strengthened the links between us, and instead of lessening the love we bore you, incalculably increased it. All was forgotten, save that you were indeed our own.

"Nearly three-and-twenty years have passed since the day which made you ours; yet never have we heard the

name of Charles Neville or traced his course. His countenance, his figure, were too remarkable ever to be forgotten, or mistaken, and notwithstanding the lapse of years, both my husband and myself would have recognised him on the instant, had he ever crossed our path. Every inquiry we could make without exciting suspicion was made both in Italy and England, but all have been without effect; and if he still lives, it must be under some other name. I have seen none like him, none who ever recalled his features—I am wrong, I have seen one, but the image was faint and shadowy; yet it brought back thoughts of the past, strangely and undefinably. My hand fails me—what is this sudden mist? Florence—my child—"

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The last line was almost wholly illegible, the words "Florence, my child," were blotted, as if the pen had there fallen; and the desire to conclude and to conceal those momentous records, was frustrated by the stroke of unconsciousness, and of death.

CHAPTER XLI.

THINKING WHAT THE WORLD WILL SAY.—A STRANGE CIRCUMSTANCE.

To Lord St. Maur's great surprise, he found his wife still sitting up awaiting his return, and evidently feeling no inclination to retire to rest. Her eyes were heavy, but it was with tears. "Ida, love, what has chanced?" he asked. "Is that poor girl worse? No? why, that's well: then what's the matter? If you were a sentimental novel reader, I should fancy you had met with some delightful work of the kind, which had beguiled you of tears far too precious to be thus wasted."

"Would they had been so called, my dear husband. I scarcely know how to tell you all in a few words; and yet I could not retire to rest without doing so. Do not look so anxious; it is nothing concerning myself, but much for my poor Florence."

"Florence! why, what of her? Does she repent her caprice in rejecting Howard, and wish to call him back again? I am afraid, in that case, I cannot help her: she should have thought twice ere she decided," replied the Earl, smiling.

"Pray do not jest, dearest Edmund; my tale is but too serious and sad." And briefly she narrated her interview with Florence—its terrible communication, and its confirmation by the manuscript still open beside her, but on the contents of which, at that moment, Lady St. Maur did not enter.

The Earl's open brow contracted. "I would not speak ill of the dead," he said, "but Mrs. Leslie has acted wrongly; she should never have permitted Florence to pass as her own child."

"So I felt at first; but I cannot feel it now. Think of the misery poor Florence must have endured from the moment she emerged from childhood, had the truth been known."

"Better than such misery as is hers now. Measures should have been taken, instead of suppressing, to proclaim the truth—to call upon all who had been accessory to the marriage, real or pretended. Some clue must then have been found, and the child resigned to its natural guardian, or brought up by Mrs. Leslie under its own name."

"But had all their efforts failed—which, from the perusal of these papers, I think most likely—poor Madeleine's tale would have been rumored all over Italy; and loving her as she did, could Mrs. Leslie have borne this?"

"Yes, if it had—which it might have done—proved the *legality* of the marriage. That proved, if she still wished to adopt the child, she might have done so; there would then have been no need to hide the truth, and Florence would have been so spared all the agony of this discovery."

"Agony indeed; but as it is—"

"As it is, I rejoice that she is now so rich an heiress as to be independent of your benevolence, further than the *convenance* of general society."

Lady St. Maur raised her eyes to his face, in bewildered inquiry. "What can you mean, my dear husband? How can this unfortunate circumstance affect my affection for, and interest in, Florence?"

"Easily, my dear Ida. Can a person of such doubtful birth and parentage continue a fit companion for the Countess St. Maur?

"And why not?" replied the Countess, laying her hand upon her husband's arm, while her beautiful eyes glistened with the energy of her appeal. "My own husband, banish such a worldling's thought! It was not yourself who spoke. You could not bid me forsake one I have so long loved, and who has shown herself so worthy of that love, because the merest chance, proceeding from the uncontrollable agony of the noblest act she has yet performed, has revealed a doubt—for it is nothing more—upon the legitimacy of her birth. Read these papers, and you will feel as I do: you cannot bid me forsake my poor friend in her deep misery. Edmund, you cannot do this!"

"Thanks to your sweet eloquence, my Ida; it has recalled my better nature: it was, indeed, with a worldling's tongue I spoke, thinking what the world would say."

"The world! God forbid the world should ever know it! Yet, did I forsake her, how could such publicity be avoided? No, not even to Minie would I have it imparted. Your honor is my own; in pledging my word to secrecy, I undertook for you also, my husband. Read but these papers; do not decide upon my future treatment to Florence till that is done. I willingly wait your determination, for I know what it will be."

Lord St. Maur promised to do all she desired, on condition that she would take the rest she so much needed, and trust his zeal for Florence's welfare as truly as her own. He was as good as his word. When the Countess joined him in the library the following morning, the important papers had been already perused, and the Earl sat with his hand resting upon them, evidently in deep thought: he looked up as his wife entered, and spoke with some emotion. "You are right, dearest: it would indeed be unnecessary cruelty to make Florence pay the forfeit of

that villain Neville's sin. You shall still be her friend, my Ida; we must do all we can to give back the peace she so much needs."

"And Howard—is there a hope, a chance of bringing them again together? The blow has fallen heaviest there. Why, why did these fatal papers ever reach her eye? Can it be for good?"

"Ida, my beloved, it is, it must be, or it would not have been," replied her husband. "We must endeavor to persuade her, also, that so it is; that in being thus revealed to her, the prayer of her adopted mother has been heard and granted."

"I ought to believe it, Edmund, but indeed it is difficult; and Howard—she would shrink in natural repugnance from telling him the truth: but cannot you or I? Surely her case does not come within the pale of those unfortunate attachments he so lately and so solemnly forswore?"

The Earl looked very thoughtful ere he replied. "I am not quite sure whether Howard, with his peculiar, perhaps over-scrupulous notions as to the purity of the woman he loves, would not shrink back from an union with one whose father is utterly unknown, save as a villain. No; Florence has decided not only nobly, but as regards Frank, most wisely. Better he should never be undeceived, never know that he really had power over a heart like hers."

"But then, is not his happiness sacrificed as well as hers?"

"Only for a short time; whereas, if the truth be revealed, he will be tortured by various contending feelings, likely to ruin his peace forever. As it is, believing as he does that he has been rejected, and decisively, a few months will effect his cure."

"A few months, my dear Edmund! Does man's love, even granting he believes it unreturned, last only that period?"

"Not always; but in Howard's case I feel assured it will last no longer. You will be shocked and disappointed, my dear Ida, but I confess that I never shared your sanguine expectations with regard to this union. It has

always appeared to me, that his regard for her was more like a *brother's* than a *lover's*—too calm, too dispassionate, for love in a person like Frank, whose feelings are never of the quietest kind."

"But 'still currents run the deepest,'" replied his wife, with a faint smile.

"Yes, love, in all passions but that of Love. It may, indeed, be concealed, but then the outward man will suffer. Never tell me that Howard would not have visibly suffered, had Florence's dependent situation been the sole obstacle to the declaration of his affection. If he had really loved, and felt that love was hopeless as long as his father lived, he would either have fled from her, or been hurried into an avowal of his feelings. I know him well enough, to be quite certain that he could not have concealed them."

"But what has made him act as he has done now?" persisted Lady St. Maur. "There could be no occasion for him to make her an offer, if he really did not love."

"I do not say he does not *fancy* himself in love, or that he has not done so some time; but only that one of these days he will find himself mistaken, and that *bona fide* love will affect him in a very different manner. Till we returned to England, he was so immersed in politics, in studying elocution, rhetoric, and such things, as to have little thought and less inclination for indiscriminate female society. Your interest in Florence, and the many trials she had undergone, affected him, and inclined him towards her. The last few months, her bereavement, and its sad effect upon her, of course, excited his warmest sympathy; and this his fancy has magnified into a still warmer feeling. He has no belief in platonic affection subsisting between the sexes; and therefore, as no woman ever interested him as Florence has done, he fancies it must be love."

"For his sake I hope you may be right, but for my poor friend it matters little. Yet, should your suggestions prove incorrect, and Frank does really love her, will you not make some effort to bring them again together?"

"Wait till Frank returns from accompanying Lord Edgemere on his pleasure trip. If he can still associate with Florence calmly, and find pleasure in her society as

before, take my word for it he has never loved. Rejection may be cold water on love's flame, and incite pride, and all kinds of petty feelings, to case up the heart; but it never yet so conquered true affection as, by six months' absence, to permit untroubled association with its object You smile—remember I only spoke of Frank when I said a few months will effect his cure"

"And you really think it is only as a brother that he feels?"

"So much so that I was rather pleased than otherwise, to hear that Florence had rejected him; fearing that he might chance to discover that he had been laboring under a delusion when it was too late. But I have almost forgotten that I had something else to say to you relative to, or rather recalled by these papers. Do you remember a strange circumstance mentioned to us just before we returned home two years ago?" Lady St. Maur did not remember it. "By-the-way, no; I do not think you were present, nor indeed has it ever crossed my mind again till this morning; but you remember Herbert Elford's love of exploring? Well, on one of these occasions he remained a day or two at a rustic village inn, near the source of the Arno. When there, the host, after many apologies, asked him, as an Englishman, to take charge of a small ebony casket, containing some papers, which he understood were English, and endeavor to discover their rightful owner. He confessed that in his youth, when performing the part of hostler, waiter, and many others, to the late mistress of the inn, he had believed petty larceny no sin, and had purloined this casket or case from a poor woman who had come there in great distress, given birth to a dead child, and died. They had never known who or what she was, except that she spoke in a strange language. Some benevolent English who had arrived there by chance, had her decently buried in the church, but put no name upon the tomb. From the great beauty of the casket he thought it must contain gems or coin, and had removed it as its owner lay in the stupor of death. Never hearing any inquiries made for it, he considered his prize secure. Instead, however, of finding gems, the casket contained nothing but papers. Thirteen years afterwards he became master of the inn: but for

some time all went wrong with him, and he began to feel twinges of conscience for past misdemeanors. He betook himself to a priest, made full confession, and received absolution, coupled with an imperative command to deliver the casket and its contents to the first English traveller who would take them in charge. For seven years he had not seen such a person, but the prosperity following his confession had convinced him that he could not neglect the priest's charge now an opportunity offered, without calling down on him the wrath of the saints, and so he entreated Elford to release him of his burden. Damp and musty papers, however, had no charm for one so wild and volatile as Elford. Had the lady been living, the affair might have looked like an adventure, and been welcomed accordingly; but as she was dead, and the child too, there could be nothing in it, so he merely glanced his eye over them, fancied they looked like love-letters, and returned the casket to the landlord, advising him by all means to guard them safely still, for he had no doubt they would one day be claimed. It is strange how completely all this had faded from my memory, and equally strange is the vividness with which it has all been recalled by the perusal of these papers."

"And do you think there is a probability of their being connected?" exclaimed Lady St Maur, who had listened to this recital with intense eagerness. "Can we procure them? Could we but remove the mystery hanging over our poor Florence, there might be happiness in store for her yet'

"My dearest Ida, we must not permit the hope of such a chance too hastily. Even were we to obtain possession of these papers, they may not be those we so much desired. The outline of the tale alone I remember; there may have been other circumstances narrated, which may throw completely a different coloring over the whole. Where Herbert Elford is at present I do not know, nor have I much chance of tracing him. Do not look so disappointed, my dear love, I would not entirely check *your* hopes, but I would caution you against exciting any in Florence. All we must endeavor to do is to soothe her back into tranquillity, to convince her that the character

evinced by her whole conduct, and if possible yet more nobly in her resolution with regard to Frank, is alone remembered. Do you do this, my love, and trust my vigilance for the rest; only give me time. A year, perhaps more, may elapse before I can obtain these much-desired papers."

"I will try to be patient, Edmund; but it will be very difficult; however, I will follow your advice. But this Charles Neville, did you never hear of or meet with such a person?"

"Never that I can recollect. I greatly fear the name was but assumed; and if so, I suspect the marriage, however duly performed, registered, and witnessed, will not hold good. However, I will make every inquiry that I can without exciting curiosity, and meanwhile we must hope and wait."

CHAPTER XLII.

NOT ALONE.—CONSOLATION IN FRIENDSHIP.

It would be equally needless and painful to linger on the long-continued sufferings of poor Florence, before the energy of life in any way returned. Fever, which the terrible inward struggle of nearly three months' continuance had excited, was so long in being subdued, that Lord and Lady St. Maur, even Sir Charles Brashleigh himself, more than once trembled lest the lost of either life or reason should ensue; and when fever was overcome, it seemed as if she must sink under the utter exhaustion of mind and frame which followed.

Her constitution, however, though delicate, was good; and all Lady St. Maur's kindness and attention were devoted to prove that she was dearer to her friend than ever. But the heart and frame had received too severe a shock for even affection to be, as yet, of much avail. After weeks of unconscious agony she did indeed appear sensible of the fond cares which she received, and as if

she struggled to prove that she was grateful; but the expression of mournfulness on her sweet, shadowy face, too painfully revealed the all-absorbing woe.

Lady St. Maur's principal care was to conceal Florence's illness, or at least its extent, from Minie; and to do so required no little skill, both from her own extreme truthfulness, which shrunk from all evasion, and that the correspondence between the sisters never, under any circumstances, flagged. She so far succeeded, however, as to satisfy Minie, who wrote a playful reproach to Florence for not taking more care of herself, and commanding her not to think of writing to her till Sir Charles gave her permission so to do. Perhaps, had the mind of the young girl been as free and unoccupied as when she had first joined Lady Mary, she would have been less easily satisfied; but new thoughts, new feelings, whose ecstatic enjoyment had never even been dreamed of before, had stolen over mind and heart; and when Florence again awoke to outward things, she became aware of a deeper, fuller tone in her sister's letters, irradiating the simplest incident or sentiment, as by a glow of summer sunshine. Whence emanated that irradiation she knew not, nor did Minie reveal it. The young girl knew she felt; but it was a sensation too sweet, too ethereal for aught so gross as words.

As soon as Sir Charles believed that his patient might be removed in safety, Lord St. Maur and his family gladly left London for Amersley, and there it was that Florence gradually and painfully became conscious that life, not death, was her allotted portion; that for some wise though inscrutable purpose she was doomed to drag on existence, when her every prayer had been for death. She felt marked out for suffering; not a gleam might descend on her blighted heart to vivify and bring forth hope. Why was this her doom? Why must she bear it? Alas, who has not felt at some period of our life, that when most needed, the power of prayer, of faith, has departed from us, and even by our God we are forsaken; that we can no longer trace the love in which, till that moment, we thought we had believed?

In the prostration of bodily and mental energy, Florence

felt that she had wilfully and needlessly cast happiness from her; that she had weaved her own fate, and therefore must despair. What or whom had she to live for now? The brightest links of life were snapped asunder, and love she had thrown from her; her heart seemed scorched and dried up within her; every feeling, every thought merged in the one sickly longing to fold Minie to her heart, and die. Physical weakness had, of course, much to do with this morbid state of feeling. Lady St. Maur, sympathizing deeply with her, knew not in what way to rouse or give her comfort. Of Howard she felt as if she could not speak, for she had no hope to give: his name never passed the lips of Florence; but the convulsive contraction of her features whenever Minie's artless effusions spoke of him, which they did very often, was all-sufficient evidence of the power he still retained.

Nothing in life is so terrible as the reaction after an extraordinary self-sacrifice. The mind almost always feels as if it had done what was in reality needless, and might have been evaded. Very often friends, falsely so named in such cases, add to this pain, by agreeing with us, and declaring that the sacrifice was little removed from folly; instead of doing all they can to support and strengthen the feeble and sinking spirit, by upholding its integrity, and affirming their conviction that the sacrifice was as imperatively demanded as nobly made. There are so few, unhappily, in the present prosaic state of things, who can thus abnegate self, that they imagine all who can and do to be under the influence of romantic delusion—a species of enthusiasm, which is in fact to such minds but another word for madness. Fortunately for Florence, the Earl and Countess St. Maur were not of these.

Florence had been sitting, one afternoon, some hours at work—the most natural, but the worst occupation for a mind diseased, permitting, as it does, thought to run on as swiftly and engrossingly as absolute idleness. She worked on mechanically till twilight, when, believing herself alone, she started up and paced the room.

"Alone! alone!" she unconsciously repeated aloud. "Had I but one tie amongst the living or the dead, but one to call my own; but there is none—none; an outcast

—nameless—from the hour of my birth! Oh, what a miserable ingrate to speak thus, when love—love, such deep love has been lavished on me; but it was only love—not nature; and now—now even that is gone; the very dead I may not call my own. Alone! Oh, the unutterable anguish of that word; without one link, one friend—"

"Florence!" said a voice of mild reproach; "have you indeed no friends?"

Florence started, and flinging herself passionately on the ottoman at the Countess's feet, she hid her face on her lap, and sobbed forth, "Forgive me, oh, forgive me; I knew not what I said! Miserable, ungrateful as I am, oh, do not throw me off as I deserve. What would be my wretched fate without you?"

"Hardly worse than, by your own words, it is now, Florence," replied Lady St. Maur. "I would indeed be your friend, but you will not permit me; and wrapping yourself in your affliction, heightening it by imaginary ills, you feel and act as if indeed you had no friend."

"Imaginary!" repeated Florence, and she loosed her hold of Lady St. Maur's hands, clasped her own tightly together, and turned from her.

"Yes, dearest, in some degree. Now, do not turn from me, as if I could feel no sympathy in your deep sorrow. I do not say you have nothing for which to grieve, but why increase your trials by dwelling upon fanciful evils, till your mind becomes enervated instead of strengthened? Why linger on the idea that every link is snapped between you and those you love so well? Can the love of three and twenty years be snapped asunder by a word? Do not dwell upon such thoughts as you gave words to just now, my Florence; they are wrong, sinful, rebelling, by increasing grief."

"But she is gone—gone. I can never return the weight of love she has borne for me; never, never repay the debt I owe her," answered Florence, with a burst of passionate, yet softening tears.

"Do not say so, dearest. If you can recall any one time when you refused to sacrifice yourself for her, these thoughts may be permitted, but not otherwise; but this you cannot do. You cannot tell me one period of your ex

stence in which you failed in duty to your supposed parents, or in love for their children; and therefore do not weep because you cannot show it farther now. Look back, and bless God that he gave you strength to act as you have done; that as Mrs. Leslie indeed filled a mother's part towards you, so did you perform a child's towards her."

"Yes, yes; could I only think of this; but the one dark thought will come, and poison all the rest. I could bear the being not her child, but—" And the softening mood was conquered by that of bitter agony, and the relieving tears were frozen, as she wildly clasped Lady St. Maur's knees. "Tell me, only tell me there is no stain upon my birth, and I can bear all else, even—even to lose—" Her voice was choked.

"And indeed there is no positive proof, my Florence," replied the Countess, with a voice of more conviction than she felt; "all must be conjecture; yet do not wholly despair. All now is dark, and seemingly hopeless; yet, if God wills, dearest, how soon all may be made light, and happiness be again your own; not as it has been, perhaps, but more enduring! Read those papers again You shudder, as if the task were too painful; yet I think, were you to re-peruse them, you would believe, as your adopted mother conjures you to believe, that there is no stain upon your birth; that poor Madeleine's dying words convinced her that she had acquired some positive proof that her child was legitimate; and though no such proofs were found, it is not impossible such may exist. And—" She paused, remembering her husband's warning. But Florence could not hope; she sank back on her low seat, saying less wildly, but with heart-rending despondency—

"You speak but to comfort me. There can be no proof now. It would have come to light long ere this, were it possible. But no, no, it cannot be."

"All things are possible with God, my Florence; his providence willed that instead of being concealed, as intended, the papers should fall into your hands, unfinished as they were; and do not doubt his power now."

"And why was it thus revealed? Why at such a moment

the truth made known? Oh! better far that I had never known myself other than I am."

"Do not say so, Florence. Had you always known the truth, fancy would have been ever at work to make your life wretched. Do not throw such reproach upon the dead, by whom you were so entirely beloved that she burdened herself with this fatal secret to preserve your joys unsullied; and she would have borne it with her to the grave, had not an unconquerable impulse urged her to its disclosure. Your adopted mother's prayer was, that it might never be known unless the concealment threatened deeper misery than the revelation. She believed her prayer would be granted; try and believe it too, my Florence, and be comforted."

"Could I but forget the mystery around my birth!" exclaimed Florence, after some minutes' tearful silence. "But I cannot—cannot. My very name sounds strange and false; I have no right to it. They hail me as the loved and cherished sister of the poet Walter; him whom I so loved to feel, to glory in, as brother! And Minie, my happy Minie! how may I bear to hear her call me sister, to cling to me as such again?"

"These are the imaginary ills against which I would warn you, my own Florence," replied the Countess, soothingly. "Natural as they are, strive, pray against them, till they are in part at least subdued. Your noble deed—the sacrifice of woman's dearest, most precious hopes—must for the time give you all enough to bear."

Florence had drooped her head on her hands, and tears were streaming faster than before; and though her slight frame shook with the paroxysm, Lady St. Maur felt, and with justice, that they gave relief.

"You do not regret this decision, my Florence," she said, after a brief pause. "You do not heighten your present sufferings by the belief that the sacrifice was unneeded? You would not recall your words? Much as you are now enduring, believe me, oh, believe me, it is slight compared to what it would have been, had you thrown yourself on his generosity, and revealed the truth; or had you concealed it and accepted him, you would have failed at the altar's foot."

"But if to you, to Lord St. Maur, my agony at the—the stain upon my birth be more imaginary than real; if I am not, as I believed, an outcast from the sympathy, the feelings of my fellow men; if, whatever be my birth, I can never be other than I have been to those who love me, oh! why might not the truth have been revealed to him, and yet our happiness secured?"

It was difficult to look on that pleading face, to listen to those tremulous words unmoved; they told a tale even then of hope, which the Countess, after her late conversation with her husband, felt that she dared not encourage.

"Were Francis Howard other than he is, my Florence, this might be; but not, not with him. He might not draw back, believing he had gone too far; but trust me, dearest, you have better secured his happiness by concealing than by revealing the truth. He loves not as you do, Florence; if he do, time will not change him; there may be happiness still in store for you both."

"May he be happy!" murmured Florence, in a tone of such submissive resignation that the Countess involuntarily drew her closer to her, and fondly kissed her pallid brow.

"Yet still have you ties to bind you to life, my Florence," she said; "still have you memories of the past to prove you were not saved in vain; and what were Minie's lot without you? Now, too, that you have competence, nay, wealth permitting your every ambitious wish for her to be fulfilled. You have still friends, dearest, friends to whom your happiness is dearer than ever. You have the recollection of a life of virtue and of love; and in securing the happiness of others, as you have ever done, you may be laying up stores for your own, which, when the present darkness is mercifully removed, will shine the lovelier for the past gloom. Think but of this, endeavor but to believe that some good must arise from this deep woe, or it would not have been permitted; and endure it nobly, as you can and will. Your secret is known but to Lord St Maur and myself; and you know that with us it is as if it were not You are the Florence Leslie, *our* Florence, which you have ever been."

Florence did not reply, but all her wildness and impa-

tience had passed away; and Lady St. Maur felt that her tears were falling fast.

At that moment Lord St. Maur bounded into the room from the balcony on which the window opened, exclaiming, "Ida, love! I have brought you a visitor—a truant, yet one you will be glad to see. Come in, Elliott, man; what do you stay there for."

But his companion hesitated; his glance fixed on the figure so gracefully and almost spiritually brought forward in the moon-light.

"What? Ronald Elliott; my own sailor-cousin; how glad I am!" exclaimed the Countess, springing up with the joyousness and elasticity of a girl. And Florence, startled and terrified at the idea of a stranger, hastily withdrew.

CHAPTER XLIII.

RONALD ELLIOTT.—THE TRUE REFUGE.

Our readers will perhaps be less inclined to welcome a stranger than was the Countess St. Maur. To her, however, the new comer was no stranger, but a near relative; and as such we trust a kinder greeting will be allowed him than were he an interloper in our narrative, merely dragged in, at the conclusion, to serve our own purposes.

"Yes; Ronald, dearest Ida. How can I thank you for this most kind welcome? Happiness, adulation and a long list of honors have not changed you: the sound of your dear voice tells me that, though I can scarcely see you," replied the young sailor, pressing his lips to the fair cheek which was yielded to him as freely as a sister's, and grasping her hands in both his.

"Changed? Not a whit!" replied her husband, laughing. "Ida St. Maur is as glad to see you, as ever Ida Villiers was; and what is more, I am not jealous; so drop your anchor here as long as you please, if the harborage be good enough for so renowned a personage as Captain Sir Ronald Elliott, which we must dub you in future."

"Captain, and Sir Ronald! Why you have made rapid strides indeed, cousin sailor; you were but third lieutenant, I think, when we last met."

"Hardly that. It is full nine years since I saw you; but my kind uncle's influence helped me even after we had lost him, Ida. So I passed my examination gloriously, as I think you know, and then to rise was easy."

"What! even to be Captain? I think your own abilities must have helped you still more than my dear father's influence; but I am very angry with you, Ronald. You have not written me a single line the last three years."

"I know it, my kind cousin, and deserve to loose an epaulette for it. But we have been from one end of the world almost to the other in that time; nearly murdered by some barbarous islanders; then wrecked, and for a full month thrown about on the wide ocean in a little cockle-shell of a boat, which I expected every hour would go to pieces; nearly starved, and made such objects by the sun and wind and spray, that you never would have known me. Then we hailed land, and imagined anchorage secure; when, behold, it was but a desert island. And though I was not quite Robinson Crusoe, having still some faithful comrades with me, I assure you Crusoe himself could not have yearned more for the sight of a ship than we did. I set all hands to work to make a craft fit for sea; but with neither tools nor proper wood nor canvass, imagine the difficulties of our task. Still we would not be thrown aback, and the fourteen months we were there passed quicker in their vain attempts, than had we made none at all. At length we succeeded; our craft was actually sea-worthy. We launched her, loaded her with the roots grain, and fruit which had been our sole mess during our solitude, and so tempted old ocean again. She took us safely to a Spanish trader, who received us on board, took our craft and tackle in tow as curious specimens of nautical ingenuity, and conveyed us to Brazil. Thence we crowded sail for old England, and after storms and dangers innumerable, here we are! The Lords of the Admiralty were pleased to have us before them, examined my log, which I have contrived to keep throughout all, gave all my brave fellows a lift, (I had lost only two,) made me a captain;

and I suppose, from their report, her Majesty was pleased to make me a baronet: why, I cannot imagine. I did nothing more than every British sailor would have done under the same circumstances."

"But, with all your toils and dangers, you are handsome as ever, Ronald; somewhat browner, and perhaps thinner and taller. But I should have known you anywhere."

"Now you would, Ida; for our primitive life in the island gave us all back our good looks," replied the young officer, who, as lights had been brought in, now appeared a frank, pleasant-looking man of some six or seven and twenty years; sunburnt, certainly, but as his eyes and hair were very dark, such marks of hard-service proved no disfigurement.

"But why did you not write us, as soon as you reached Plymouth?" inquired Lord St. Maur.

"Because I did not know that you were in England. You were in Italy when Ida last wrote."

"And how did you find us out at last?"

"Why first I crowded sail for Lord Edgemere's, but found he was in Wales or Scotland, or on some such tack; then I bethought me of Lord Melford. And as I was no longer the rough middy, Ronald Elliott, whose mother did such a foolish thing as to marry a poor lieutenant, and her brother Lord Edgemere a still more shocking thing, as to forgive the runaway match, and receive her and her fatherless boy into favor, but a captain and a baronet, why I thought they might deign to speak to me: so I took them by surprise, was received most graciously; heard you were here, and was off again in a twinkling; for no harborage was ever so safe and happy for Ronald Elliot as where his cousin Ida is to be found."

"I thought sailors were too honest ever to flatter," replied the Countess, laughing.

"Ida, you know it to be truth! It was all through you my poor widowed mother was forgiven, though you were but a girl of fourteen. You attended her long illness and death, with all the devotedness and care of a daughter—gave me the love of an elder sister—made every one treat me as your brother. Oh, how proud and cold you looked and spoke if any one dared look down on me; nor rested

till my ardent wishes were fulfilled and I was a sailor. And was this all? No, Ida, no; if I have indeed attained to steadiness and manliness and worth, to you I owe it all; your affection, your example, your counsels, have made me what I am."

It was impossible to doubt the sincerity of these blunt and rapid words. His hands trembled, his lip quivered, and then, as if to banish every trace of emotion, he laughingly inquired: "Who was that graceful figure I saw sitting (like Niobe, all tears) at your feet, when St. Maur hurried me so irreverently through the window? She could not have thrown herself into a more becoming attitude for effect, particularly as the moonlight streamed upon her."

"Effect! poor girl, the last thing in her mind at that moment. She is a young friend of mine, and just at present in great affliction. You will probably see her tomorrow; but I warn you, you will be disappointed if you expect any thing remarkable. She is ill and in sorrow, and not at all likely to attract such a laughter-loving person as yourself."

The return of young Elliott was a source of real rejoicing both to the Countess and her husband. They had lost all trace of him so long, that both had feared more than either liked to express. Florence had often heard Lady St. Maur allude to her cousin, even during their first intimacy at St. John's. as wishing she could see him before she left England; and she could therefore well sympathize in the joy with which her friend sought her before retiring to rest, to communicate the happy tidings of his unexpected return.

Suffering as their long conversation had been to Florence, it was yet, as Lord St. Maur had predicted—productive of good. Her mind gradually resumed a more healthy tone. Happy indeed, how could she be? But the morbid anguish, which turned every memory into suffering, subsided. Although at first shrinking from the task as increase of misery, she followed Lady St. Maur's advice, and re-read the MSS. And though her tears fell fast and unrestrainedly, the heavy weight on mind and heart gave way. She could now feel the full extent of love borne

towards her by her adopted mother. In her first perusal the truth had burst upon her with a shock and agony which bewildered every faculty. She was only sensible that she was the child of misery and shame. Now she read differently. Her adopted mother's fond appeal seemed to sink upon her heart, bidding her trust in God, and believe that those papers were indeed revealed but for good. She guessed not wherefore, and she asked not. The struggle was dark and terrible, known only to the Reader of all hearts; but at length that gentle spirit was enabled to merge every individual feeling in the one deep, earnest prayer for the happiness of one!

"Let him be happy, even if to be so he must forget me and love another." Could those voiceless orisons have found vent in words, such would they have been. I ask but to be the unknown instrument working his happier fate; but if even this be denied me—if our paths must indeed be severed, and forever—still, still, let him be happy. And for me—oh! Father of Mercy, lift up this yearning heart to Thee!"

There was no wild enthusiasm in her prayer. Days, nights, aye, weeks had passed, ere her seared heart could frame it in sincerity and truth, and even in secret prayer dash down all individual hope. It was not that she had loved him with unreturned affection. She was not likely, at such a moment, to think with Lord St. Maur, had she known his suspicions, that Howard felt but a brother's love. But she never wavered in her unselfish prayer She roused every energy, by the conquest of self, through constant and beneficial employment to assist in its fulfilment. She was not one of those who think that prayer, even for the subjection of feeling, is sufficient without deed. She knew she must help herself as well as pray, and trust on the help that to all, who seek, is given from on high. She found support, too, in the consciousness of her own integrity, a support which, had Lady St. Maur sought to persuade her that her mighty sacrifice had been uncalled for, must have been denied her; and when even the sweet dream of his love was loosed by his own words from the fibres of her heart, she found that strength had indeed been given to *act* as she had *prayed*.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE FAMILY TOUR.

Francis Howard did not linger long in London after his rejection by Florence; he joined Lord Edgemere's family, who were then at the Isle of Anglesea, in a much shorter time than gentlemen in his forlorn situation generally take to recover their equilibrium. He pondered again and again over the conduct of Florence, and also over his own. He certainly never had given her any right to suppose his attentions devoted until lately, and, therefore, could have no reason to imagine she had ever shown such preference for his society as to cause any present belief that she had treated him ill. He thought that she certainly had not seemed to dislike his society and conversation. "Dislike? No! But," mentally argued the young politician, "there is a wide space between not disliking and love. Now I could not go hang or drown myself, as I hear some despairing lovers talk of doing. Nay, if it were not for very awkwardness, I should have much preferred still lingering in her mild, rational society, than seeking others. I wish she could have loved me: mine may not have been the wild passionate emotion of some that I know; but it was one, I think, which would have made us both happy could she but have loved me. I never knew what female companionship and society were till I knew her, and I could have wished to secure them mine, could I have made her happy as I hoped; but may I not still do so? or is her rejection final? Yes—and I am much mistaken if she do not love another; but who—who has gained her affections? It is all mystery; but there was more in her manner than met my eye. Well, well, be it so; I trust when we next meet, it will be still as the friends which we have been."

Could Lord St. Maur have read his mental soliloquy, he certainly would have had his suspicions confirmed. Francis Howard was much too unselfish and noble a person to entertain any petty and unworthy feelings, even

had he considered himself injured by his rejection. But the above quiet, unimpassioned train of thought was not that of a man ardent in his suit. His belief, too, that Florence loved another, ably aided him to conquer the delusion which had engrossed him, and before he had been a month with Lord Edgemere, he felt himself once more a free man.

Now, let us not be accused of making our hero a very uninteresting and most capricious personage. Frank did love Florence with most unselfish love; esteemed, admired her; felt that had Heaven blessed him with such a sister, his lot would have been happy as earth could make it, and as woman had never so arrested a fleeting thought before, he imagined the feeling deeper than in reality it was; cherished it, dwelt upon it, till he began to think why should he repine that Heaven had denied him such a sister, when love might give him such a bride? His rejection removed the delusive glow of fancy, and his feelings gradually subsided into their original repose.

It was a merry, though a small party, that he joined; although it so happened that himself and Alfred Melford were the only single men amongst them. Melford was, of course, always the *attaché* of his fair betrothed. Minie Leslie sported gayly from one to the other of the party; sometimes the charge of the Earl himself, who was very fond of her; at others the chosen companion of Lord Henry Villiers, whose wife was not quite strong enough for the long exploring rambles which he preferred, and which Minie was only too happy to join; at others sharing joyously the lively excursions of Viscount Villiers, Lord Edgemere's grandson and heir, a fine boy of fourteen, the pet of the family. Except in her *tête-à-tête* rambles with Melford, however, Lady Mary always considered and treated Minie as her own especial charge, and under her fostering care and kindness the young girl had overcome the shock of her mother's death, and though more often shadowed than formerly, her natural liveliness had almost entirely returned, and with renovated health, yet more dazzling beauty. Not the most callous could have looked at her at any time with indifference, and more particularly when returning, glowing with health and enjoyment, from

a ramble, or springing up the rocky heights of Wales, leaving all her companions, even the young Lord Villiers himself, far behind her; pausing, but to look back with laughing triumph, and seeming from her light, exquisitely graceful figure, her sunny ringlets and lovely face, the very spirit of the scenes she loved.

It was not a very unlikely state of things, therefore, that when Howard joined them, Minie should fall to his especial care, particularly in those excursions taken by all the party; or that, being mutually pleased, they should come together *tête-à-tête*. Minie was scarcely eighteen, and so completely a child, that no awkwardness ever marked her manner. She had not learned even to suppress a feeling or a sentiment. Full of grateful devotion towards her friends, though she never forgot to evince respect, she mingled with, and caressed them as a loving child, winning the affections of all, almost unconsciously, in return.

At first she was delighted that Frank had joined them because she could talk to him, and he could tell her of Florence—her own dear Florence! And then her rambles suddenly became more delightful than they had ever been; and next, she felt strangely disinclined for any other companion, or, at least, they fell far short in agreeableness to Mr. Howard; and then, her solitary walks became endowed with a sort of delicious dreamy trance, which she had never experienced before; and still the simple girl guessed not, dreamed not, the nature of the emotion which was engrossing her; she only knew that happy as she had been before, she was infinitely happier now; innocent as she was, she could no more have concealed the sudden glittering of the dark blue eye, the flushing of the delicate cheek, which greeted Frank whenever he appeared, however often in the day, than she could have defined why this should be. Lady Mary, too, happy in her own engagement, and finding sufficient employment in being with or thinking of Melford, did not notice these little equivocal signs, or if she did, perhaps secretly enjoyed the idea of her lovely protégée's captivating one of the handsomest and most engaging young men of the day. However this might be, she resolved

not to breathe one word to awaken Minie to the true state of her feelings: it would either create foolish ideas in the child's head, or make her restless and unhappy by striving to conceal, if she could not conquer, her feelings. No; things should take their own course, and she only hoped Frank would finally be caught; it would be such rare diversion to see so reserved a sort of personage, when women were in the question, fairly in love. The other members of the family, accustomed to regard Minie as quite a child, either did not observe, or thought nothing of, her evident pleasure in his society and conversation. So small a share of kindness and notice could delight her, that it was no wonder she found pleasure in receiving it from him. She was considered too young, too innocent for any deeper feeling.

For Francis himself, he at first supposed it was on account of his regard for Florence that he felt so perfectly satisfied with the beautiful charge assigned him, that he was never weary of listening to Minie's conversation of her cherished sister, and many a tale of Florence's devotedness in their days of privation and suffering did those young lips pour forth with a natural eloquence which reached the inmost heart. He listened enraptured, believing it all for Florence's sake; yet in his solitary hours it was the sylph-like form, the lovely face, the silver-toned voice of Minie which haunted him sleeping or waking, not the subject of her tale; and then he met again the beaming eye and flushed cheek, and his heart whispered, were not these signs proofs of no indifference on her part? He watched her closely; he could not define it, but there certainly was a slight difference between her manner to him, and that to others. Once he had come upon her suddenly, as she was attempting to sketch an old tree before the party set off, and her hand so trembled as quite to prevent the completion of her task, and they were called to the carriage with it still unfinished. And yet she looked so happy. Then, during the anxious period of Florence's illness, though neither Minie nor Frank knew its extent or imagined its cause, it was a common source of interest to both, and Minie seemed to look up to him so confidingly not only for the first intelligence from the post,

but for sympathy also. And whereas she was at first so anxious on account of her sister, that even her beloved music lost its balm, it was Howard's persuasion which again called it forth, making that sweet voice once more lose itself in the gushing song, as he hung over her entranced. Was it the illness of poor Florence, or Minie's tearful eye and pale cheek, which so engrossed him? If the first, it was strange that he did not think more of alleviating Florence's malady, than how to soothe and comfort her sister's sorrow on account of it. Strange that he could rest so easily satisfied of her well-doing under the care of Sir Charles Brashleigh and Lady St. Maur, and linger so continually by the side of Minie, using all the eloquence of words and manner, and bringing out all the treasures of his mind to while her into cheerfulness again.

There is no balm so effectual for the lingering soreness of rejection as the consciousness of being beloved by another. Men are sometimes accused of marrying in pique, and not for love; yet, perhaps, all such unions are not unhappy. The heart cannot rest desolate, and the faintest sign of interest, of undesignedly revealed affection, is hailed at such moments as filling up the void within, exciting another sympathy, and recalling the self-esteem which sinks for the moment beneath the pang of unreturned affection. Now, we know Frank did not really and passionately love Florence, though he fancied he did; but yet he was disappointed, and his whole soul pined and yearned for female sympathy and love; and once, when the thought did cross his mind that Minie was not indifferent to him, that she could, if she did not already, love him, the idea was fraught with such ecstacy that he absolutely started. Had he so soon forgotten Florence? he asked himself, angry at his own fickleness. No; his regard for her seemed not a whit abated; yet if it were love he now felt, he had never loved Florence, for the emotions were as distinct as possible. He was perplexed and annoyed at himself; yet to behold Minie's exquisite beauty, so to revel in her thrilling voice as to feel its echo in his inmost soul, to look in those soft eyes when they glanced up so timidly yet so innocently at his, even to feel that she clung to him for support and guidance in

some of their precarious rambles; all this created such new, yet such exquisite sensations, that by the time they reached Scotland, he had come to the conclusion that he must be in love; and if he were, he certainly had never been in love before.

He satisfied himself at length that the difference must have originated in the fact, that by Minie he was beloved, and by Florence he was not. How little did he imagine, that the controlled and subdued exterior of the latter was but the proof of her love for him; that all deep emotions, with her, were under such powerful restraint, that they could not break their bonds. Hers was WOMAN'S love, deep, still, omnipotent; Minie's was the first fresh spring of GIRLHOOD, as true, perchance as fond, but spurning alike restraint and concealment, because its source was hidden from herself. Florence could resign that love, if to do so might secure the happiness of its object, better than to manifest it; she could resign it and yet live, feeling that

"The heart may break, yet brokenly live on."

Minie, had her love been severed from its object, might, perhaps, have buried it in her heart awhile; but then she would have drooped and died.

Still Howard watched well; still was the idea that he was beloved, too precious, too consoling to be risked for an avowal. Perhaps after all, he was deceived; and Minie's engaging artlessness and innocent confidence were only fancied love. It was strange that in all these incongruities of feeling, the thought of his father never intruded; Minie was very nearly the same in point of fortune as her sister had been when he first knew her, and Lord Glenvylle's consent just as unlikely to be gained; yet Frank never thought about that, thus confirming Lord St. Maur's belief, that had he really loved Florence, he would never have been so long quiet on the subject.

CHAPTER XLV.

AN ACCIDENT AND ITS EFFECT.

Four, five months had passed since Lord Edgemere's family commenced their tour. Wales, the Lakes, the Borders—by Scott's immortalizing pen made famous—Melrose, Abbotsford, and Auld Reekie herself, had all been visited; and never, certainly, had tourist been more alive to the beauties of nature, or more inclined to enjoy the delights and love, the disagreeables of travelling, than this happy party. An unlooked-for rencontre greatly heightened Lady Mary's and Melford's enjoyment. At the house of a friend in Edinburgh, they happened to meet the identical Mrs. Major Hardwicke, who, when Flora Leslie, had occasioned Florence so much misery. That her marriage had been productive of as much happiness as is generally found in elopements (*i. e.*, none at all) was not sufficient for Melford. He had resolved that she should know that her nefarious plans had all failed in their intended effect of estranging Florence from Lady St. Maur, and smart under the knowledge. He succeeded to his heart's content: although fairly puzzled as to whether or not he had identified her with the Flora Leslie of whom he spoke, she winced under his words. He had commenced the subject so naturally, and led her to listen with such professional skill, (be it remembered he was a barrister), that there was no retreat, no possibility of changing the subject. And both Melford and Lady Mary, with pardonable satisfaction, rejoiced in the pain and terror lest she should betray her own identity, which the former's quiet conversation caused. She never met them again; but Florence was fully avenged; far more so, indeed, than her own forgiving spirit would have either permitted or approved.

The middle of December was to find Lord Edgemere's party at home again, in their fine old baronial mansion, within a seven-mile ride of Amersley; and it was about the commencement of November that they were com-

fortably ensconced for a week or ten days in a picturesque little hotel on the banks of Loch Lomond, enjoying the full beauty of the autumnal tints in the magnificent scenery around them.

"What has become of Frank this morning?" inquired Lady Mary, entering the luncheon-room one day, followed by her faithful cavalier, Alfred Melford, with whom the morning had been passed in a *tête-à-tête* ramble.

"Nobody seems to know. Minie, you are generally acquainted with his movements. What has become of him—can you tell?"

"Indeed, you make me a person of infinitely more importance than I am, my dear Lady Mary," she innocently replied, perfectly unconscious that the question was so marked;" I only know he said something last night about exploring some rocky fall or other, too dangerous for the soberly inclined, and even for me; and too adventurous for you and Mr. Melford, as it needed rather more caution than you would just at present be inclined to take," she added, with a mischievous smile.

"He is very impertinent—and so are you, Miss Minie, for repeating and enjoying his pertness," replied Lady Mary, threateningly holding up her hand.

"By the way, so he did; I remember it now," exclaimed Melford at the same moment.

"How came you to be so wonderfully oblivious, my learned counsellor?" said Lord Edgemere, laughing.

"Eyes, ears, and mind, were all so pleasurably employed in the present tense, that memory had no space for the past, my lord, though it only extended to last night," replied the young man, laughing also. "But he ought to be at home now, for he promised not to be later than two."

"I only hope his love of adventure will not end in an accident. Those brakes and hollows which he resolved to explore are full of hidden dangers. If either his horse's or his own foot slip, I would not answer for the consequences," quietly observed Lord Henry Villiers.

"Oh, never fear for him," answered Melford, "he has more lives than a cat, or he would have been dead long ago. I warned him how dreadfully slippery the heavy

rains had made the unfrequented roads, but be only laughed at me."

"Minie! have you been out this morning? You have either taken too long a walk, or not been out at all, for you are as white as your collar. Mamma, why did you not keep her in better order?" said Lady Mary, fixing a very meaning look on the young girl's face, whose paleness was instantly lost in a glowing blush; and she answered hurriedly, "Indeed I have been out. Algernon took me a lovely walk, though not as long a one as usual."

"It might have been much longer," gayly rejoined the young Viscount; "but the keen air from the lake had created in me such a giant appetite, that Minie took pity on me, and returned sooner than we otherwise should have done. Aunt Mary, have the kindness to give me some of that fine Scotch dish, name unpronounceable, which you have near you. You and Mr. Melford may contrive to keep your hunger within bounds; as I have heard, love never thinks of eating. Now I have no such pleasant succedaneum, so must e'en look to solids for recreation. Grandmamma, is there any chance of my dying of decline produced from starvation? You were sadly afraid for me before we began to travel. What do you say, now?"

"I thank God my fears are groundless, my dear boy," replied Lady Edgemere, with emotion, for the early death of her eldest son ever made her tremble for his heir.

"Why, what in the world has come to William?" continued the boy, springing up from his substantial repast; "look how he is flying down the garden, as if a set of hounds were at his heels. Well, what is it, Will? Scared by all the bogies of the lake?" he added, laughing, as the parlor door burst open, and the person of whom he spoke appeared, looking white with terror.

"My master—my poor master!" were the first words intelligible. "They say his horse was seen to leap the precipice yonder—dashed to pieces with the fall. Oh! what has become of my dear, dear master?"

"He is here you faithful idiot!" replied a well known voice, some yards behind him; and before the exclamations of horror the sudden start occasioned by William's

terrible information had subsided, Frank Howard stood in the midst of the group, without a soil or stain, or any visible mark of danger. "Before you frighten all my friends another time, my good fellow, be sure that your master is dashed to pieces, as well as his horse. Poor fellow! that is loss enough for me, but not quite sufficient to terrify every one thus. Do not shake so, man, and stare at me, as if you saw my ghost instead of flesh and blood. I tell you I am safe and well, even unhurt; in just sufficient danger to bid me thank God it was no worse. Now go; there's a good fellow. I am afraid you have frightened others as much as yourself," he added turning away to hide his emotion, as his servant caught his hand and sobbed over it like a child, and then hastily retired, trying to beg pardon. The relief was as sudden as the shock, and the nerves of the luncheon-party had, in consequence, for the most part, recovered their equilibrium before Howard had done speaking; but on one amongst them the effect of the shock was rather more severe. Minie Leslie had sprung up with a faint suppressed cry on William's first words, which on the sudden sound of his master's voice was followed by what, in such a child as herself, appeared most strange and incomprehensible. She dropped down where she stood so perfectly lifeless, that she might have been seriously hurt had not her head fallen on the ample folds of Lady Edgemere's velvet dress. Nor was any member of the party aware of the occurrence, so entirely were their faculties absorbed in Frank's appearance; until an exclamation, in which the words, "Minie! good Heaven—is this for me? my precious Minie!" unheard by the greater number, but remembered some hours after with peculiar pleasure by Lady Mary, recalled the attention of all to the fainting girl.

A scene of confusion of course followed. Disregarding all the questions, whether ejaculated or expressed, which were poured upon him, Frank bounded from one side of the room to the other, and in a second had raised Minie in his arms.

"Bring her into this room, Frank: there is more air; and she will recover the sooner out of all this confusion,"

was Lady Mary's wise direction, leading the way into an adjoining apartment which was vacant, and pointing to a couch on which he placed his still senseless charge; hanging over her, however, as very loath to leave her.

"Now go, my very good friend; you have been the means of frightening her to death. Let that satisfy you, and do not attempt more. I can better restore her to life than you can."

"I cannot be so unfeeling as to leave her in this state, Lady Mary," he exclaimed.

"Yes you can, very easily. You will have enough to do to answer all the multitudinous questions as to the cause of William's incomprehensible fright. Do go, and keep all the folks away. This poor child will recover sooner when alone with me; there is a streak of color coming into her face already. After all, it may have nothing to do with the fright. She was looking very pale before, and the room was very close, and the luncheon over savoury," she added, looking in Howard's anxious face, with the most provoking expression imaginable. But if she wished thus to lower his *amour propre*, she most certainly did not succeed: however presumptuous the idea, that fainting confirmed the long-indulged hope that he was beloved; and the thought was so entrancing that he could scarcely restrain himself from folding the senseless Minie closer and closer to him, and being actually daring enough to press his lips to her pale cheek. But Lady Mary, provoking Lady Mary, was present, and he would not make himself such a fool; so after lingering till quite satisfied that she really was recovering, he was obliged to obey the impatient command, to go, and keep every one away, as Minie must be left quiet.

He went, and Lady Mary, carefully closing the door, returned, with some peculiarly pleasant feelings, to her task of restoring the now quickly reviving animation. After a few minutes, Minie started up, looking round her bewildered, and then exclaimed—"What has happened, Lady Mary? Who brought me here? and why does my head feel so light and strange?"

"To your first and last question, my dear, one answer will suffice. You have been silly enough to faint; and

such being the case, it is no very great wonder you should feel somewhat light-headed. To your second query, Who brought you here? I answer even that honorable gentleman, Francis Howard, as you were somewhat too heavy, in your senseless state, for my arms to support."

"Mr. Howard!" repeated Minie, her cheek flushing crimson; "faint! I never did such a thing in my life."

"Very likely not, my dear," replied Lady Mary, laughing; "but there is no reason that you never should. *Why* you did such a silly thing indeed, I cannot tell; it could scarcely have been the fright about Frank, for the other day you saw a man thrown off his horse and nearly killed, and you scarcely even changed color, but sprang out of the carriage to give all the help that you could."

"But, Frank—Mr. Howard, I mean—is not—not—hurt?—has not been—"

"Killed? No, my dear; being in very substantial preservation; as I told you, he conveyed you here himself. That he has lost his horse, dashed over some precipice, is all I can understand of the strange tale. Now don't faint again for the fate of a horse; that would be too ridiculous. I do not mean to scold you, silly Min; you could not help fainting, so you need not cry about it, like a simpleton. Come, try and go to sleep. Fainting fits always punish those who really have them, by compelling them to silence and solitude for some hours."

Minie had sunk back when Lady Mary mentioned the fate of the horse, pale as before, the large tears slowly oozing from her closed eyelids, and it was with difficulty she restrained a strong shudder, as she pictured what might have been the fate of its master. Lady Mary affectionately kissed her, told her to be a good child, and she would stay by her.

"But Mr. Melford, Lady Mary, why should I keep you from him?"

"He must do without me, my dear; I have honored him all the morning. Unless you like Frank's nursing better than mine; if so, I will go away, and send him?"

"No, no, pray do not, dearest Lady Mary; what would

he think of me? what must he think of me now; and he used to praise my strong nerves. How could I be so foolish as to be so frightened!"

"Never mind what anybody thinks, my dear, but obey me and lie still. Depend upon it as Frank caused the fright, he will not quarrel with your want of nerve."

Minie did not reappear till dinner, and then pitying her confusion and shyness, Lady Mary had made it a point of entreating that no notice might be taken of her lingering paleness. Howard led her in to dinner, placed himself beside her, and paid her all sorts of little attentions, so as quite to remove the idea that she had sunk in his estimation from her unusual weakness. The accident was freely discussed, but the feeling eloquence with which Howard alluded to his almost miraculous preservation brought the bright drops anew into her eyes. However, it was no heaviness of spirits which produced them, for before the evening closed she was as lively as usual, seated at Lord Edgemere's feet, singing song after song in her own rich, thrilling voice; thus proving, Lady Mary laughingly declared, that though her fainting looked very like it, she was no fine lady after all; she had not been languishing and sentimental half long enough.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A MORNING WALK.—TRUE LOVE.—DIFFICULTIES.

Francis Howard slept very little that night. Dreams of Scotch precipices and dying horses, blue lakes and fairy-like nymphs, mingled very incongruously in his slumbers, until at last they all gave place to one fair image, and one resolute thought which outlived his sleeping visions, and so actuated his waking that he started from his couch determined to be undecided no longer, but in actual words demand if he might be blessed or not; and an opportunity offered itself so invitingly, that it seemed sent by his good angel, on purpose to bring him to the point. Lord Edgemere's party were all fond

of walking before breakfast; so that meal generally took place at a very late hour: and just as Howard had completed his toilette—rather a longer task than usual, from his pacings to and fro in his chamber—he saw Minie Leslie and Algernon Villiers bound along the garden, arm in arm.

"Now, then," he thought. "But what can I do with Algernon?" followed instantly. "Oh! my fowling-piece; he will be off to try its metal directly he sees it;" and he set forth gun in hand. The young Viscount hailed him with a shout of delight.

"What! going to shoot so early, Mr. Howard? Oh! do let me have one shot before you go."

"And destroy Miss Leslie's recovered nerves on the instant? No, my good fellow, if you want my gun, leave me the care of your fair companion; that is, if she will accept the exchange."

"Oh! you will take much better care of her. Now I have smelt gunpowder; you had better let me go."

"You may shoot here if you like; I am not at all afraid," she answered, laughing. "I am not so silly as to be frightened at a gun."

"No, no! I will not hear of it;" hastily interposed Frank, keeping firm hold of his gun. "An accident may happen in a moment. Promise me to find William, and tell him to go with you, and you shall have the gun, but not otherwise."

"I promise faithfully, most inexorable mentor. Why, grandmamma herself could not take more care of me. I am off; a pleasant walk to you both," and he bounded away.

Howard watched till his servant joined him, then satisfied as to his safety, "A pretty cavalier, so to desert his lady fair," he began, as he put her arm in his, according to custom, and they turned in the direction of the lake. "Does he deserve mercy? He ought to be expunged from the list of all good knights and true."

"Nay, Mr. Howard, you ought not to be so severe upon him; for were not you the tempter?" she replied, archly.

"Indeed I was, and more so than you imagine. I turned tempter on purpose to get rid of him, and become sole

guardian of your ramble. My egregious folly yesterday lost me the pleasure of your society almost all day; so I determined to make up for it this morning. Will you forgive my sending off Algernon? and can you trust me with your safety for an hour or so—*tête-à-tête?*"

"I will do both, very willingly," she answered, with perfect artlessness. "For the one needs no forgiveness at all; and for the other, you have always been so very careful of my safety, I cannot think why I should not trust you now."

"But will you do more, Minie? I cannot call you Miss Leslie, for the life of me."

"And why should you, Mr. Howard? You never have; and, indeed, I am not Miss Leslie. I do not like to be so titled; it sounds so formal, or else as if you were displeased with me."

"Displeased!" exclaimed Frank, with most extraordinary impetuosity; "who could ever be displeased with you?"

"Not many have been, Mr. Howard; for I was always the petted child of my own family. But those who so loved and cared for me are all gone but one, and I must not expect to go through life so fondly cared for now." The bright smile vanished, and her beautiful eyes swelled with large tears. She bent down her head, but the sudden quivering of her voice betrayed them, and Frank found it impossible to resist pressing the hand which rested on his arm closer to him. A very brief interval, and she looked up with a smile radiant as before. "But it seems as if I were always to be spoilt and fondled; for my friends are still so kind. Lady Mary, and Lord and Lady Edgemere, and even you, Mr. Howard, do all you can to make me, oh, so happy!"

"I, Minie! would to heaven that I could make you happy, happier than any person else!" She looked at him, actually startled at his violence, and met in return a glance which, though she could not understand it, made her withdraw hers on the instant, and blush deeply. "But why not call me Frank, if I may call you Minie?" he said, striving to make his heart beat less quickly, for the nearer he approached the words he most desired to

say, the more difficulty there seemed in saying them. "I dislike formality as much as you do."

"Oh, but it is so different; I am simple Minie Leslie to every one, but I could not call Lady Mary 'Mary,' or Mr. Melford 'Alfred;' and I have known you less time than either, and I suppose that is the reason why I feel as if I could never call you Frank."

But timidly as it was pronounced, the name had never sounded so thrillingly sweet in Howard's ears as at that moment.

"Never! nay, nay, you shall not say so, Minie; indeed you must call me Frank, and very often. But I frighten you with my violence. You are still weak from yesterday's alarm, unhappy as I was to cause it."

"Indeed, I am not, Mr. Howard. You must not let me lose my character for courage because I was so foolish. I do not know how it was, but I could not help it."

"And I would not have had it otherwise for the universe, if—if I may hope from it what would make me the happiest man alive. Minie, dearest Minie, I wanted to tell you a long tale, to beseech you to listen, to bear with me, but I can only ask you one thing now. You said just now that I too made you happy; tell me, I implore you, can you will you trust me always to make you happy? Will you let me be to you all you have lost, and let me love, cherish, bless you, even more than they did? dearest, will you, can you love me?"

It was no fancy now, for Minie did tremble so violently that Howard was compelled to put his arm round her, or she must have fallen; but never did a more genuine look of bewilderment struggling with happiness, meet his earnest gaze than hers at that moment.

"Me! you can not mean it. Oh! no, no!" were the only words he heard; and though her face had been covered with her hands directly after that one bewildered gaze, either the power or the will failed her to break from his support.

"Mean it? indeed, indeed I do! I would not, I dared not play with such a heart as yours. My own Minie! listen to me, for you shall know the truth, even though it lose me the happiness I crave. I joined Lord Edgemere's

party, wounded, depressed, miserable. I had thought I loved, and that the object of my fancied love was not indifferent to me; I had associated with her so long on terms of friendly intimacy, felt for her such strong regard, that when I saw her in distress I fancied that regard stronger than it was, dwelt upon it, encouraged it, thought upon it, the more perhaps because her manner became colder as mine warmed. I proposed, and was rejected; feelingly, kindly, most kindly, but so decidedly that I believed the heart I then wished to gain had been already given to another; and the delusion thus broken convinced me I had been deceived, not in her, but in myself. How completely deceived I knew not till I associated in all the happiness of a home with you; and I felt I had never known love till then, that it was but a brother's love, heightened by imagination, which I had felt before. Yet I let weeks, months pass, to be sure of myself, to feel that I could offer you a heart so entirely your own that it contained not even a memory to alloy its truth. I sought you first, because it seemed a sad pleasure to speak of Florence; then gradually I felt it was your voice, your smile, your gentleness which bound me to your side—that you were rapidly filling up the void which the fancy that I was never to be beloved had opened in my heart—you were spreading such joy around my path, and in my soul, that I felt, could I but win your love, I should never feel despondency or loneliness again. Minie, dearest Minie, will you return this love, the first in truth, though it appears the second? Will you trust, believe that no passion lingers for other than your gentle self? Can you trust your happiness with me, and believe me, that dear as it has been to father, mother, brother, all who have loved you, it will be more precious still to me?"

He had spoken rapidly, and with strong emotion; but his arm was still encircling Minie, and she had not removed it. There were large tears coursing down her cheek but her eyes had been gradually raised to his, first in wonderment, and then in such artless confidence that he scarcely needed words.

"And can you, who have once loved Florence, sought

Florence for your own, in every truth, so love me?" she asked, so pleadingly, so simply, that her lover was irresistibly compelled to press his lips to hers; and frightened as she was at the action, the fear only made her unconsciously cling closer to him. "Oh! Mr. Howard, how can I be to you what she would have been—the companion, the friend, all that your wife should be? Simple as I am, child as they tell me I still am, how is it, how can it be possible you should love me?"

"Minie, you are no child Truth, guilelessness, sweetness; you have all these, all that makes your sex worthy of love, and fitted to retain it. If I were to leave you for years, and go mingle with hundreds of fashion's daughters, I should turn to you still for all that would make me happy, all that would make my home. Dearest, loveliest; you are lonely only in your own artless mind, simple only in your too humble opinion of yourself; child-like, aye, in all that can make childhood lovely, and rivet love so strongly that not even death could tear it from me. The proudest noble in the land might envy me your love, if indeed, indeed, I may hope that I plead not in vain. You will accept a heart, though it was once proffered to another —you will love me? Speak, dearest; but one little word —you will, you *do* love me!"

She could not speak that word, little as it was; but she lifted up her sweet face, fixed its clear, truthful orbs for one brief minute fully upon his, and that lovely head was bent down, and the rich mantling blushes hidden on his bosom.

"I am satisfied! Bless you my own beloved," whispered the enraptured Howard; and then he added, "And you can trust me, Minie? you will trust me that I have loved, and do love but you?"

"That you do love but me. Yes; or you would not thus speak," she answered, unhesitatingly. "That you have never loved before—I know not how you could have associated intimately with Florence, and yet not love her. But even if you had, with her rejection caused you to conquer that affection, do you, can you think, because you had once loved her, I—I could—I must love you less? Oh,

Mr. Howard, you do not know how I love and reverence my sister, or you would not think thus. Would—would that I were as worthy to be your wife as she is!"

"And will she not tell me that you are, sweet one?" replied her lover; "that there never was or will be one more deserving of love than Minie; I have heard her say it often, though neither she nor I knew what that loved being would become to me. But you have twice called me Mr. Howard, dearest. Will you not say Frank now?"

"Indeed, indeed, I do not know that I can even now," she said playfully. "But I will try to feel that you have been, and still will be Frank to me," she added, after a brief pause, and with an artless timidity, perfectly irresistible to her betrothed, who in this interview certainly proved that Lord St. Maur knew him better than he did himself; for not a thought, not a shadow found entrance to dim that one sweet hour of love first told. A character peculiarly alive to domestic ties, to be clung to, to feel that one being in the whole world was dependent upon him; it was no common bliss to find all these in one, truthful, innocent, and lovely, as Minie Leslie; and Howard was fairly carried out of himself. Do not blame him, reader; Lord St. Maur was right—he had never loved before.

Great was the astonishment of both Frank and Minie, when at length remembering they had not breakfasted, they returned to the house, and found the breakfast parlor deserted by all but Lady Mary and Alfred Melford, who had waited for the loiterers. Much amusement their conscious confusion of course elicited, but Frank cleverly contrived to turn the stream of ridicule upon himself so as to permit Minie to eat what breakfast she could in comparative comfort; the laughing light in her deep blue eyes, the varying flushes on her cheek, betraying a tale of happiness, however, which no satire could alloy. She retreated to her own room after breakfast, and there Lady Mary followed her.

"You will never do for a fine lady, Minie," she said on entering. "Here have you been up early, and have taken a walk, fasting, long enough to tire an elephant. You naughty child; jokes apart, you ought to have had more

care of yourself after your illness yesterday; and, in serious earnest, as you have been intrusted to my care, I must ask you where you have been?"

"In serious earnest, dear Lady Mary, I can read in your eyes, kind though they look, that you think I have forgotten propriety in remaining out so long, and indeed, indeed, it would have been very wrong if I had known how long it was, if—but why speak so now," she added, breaking off abruptly, and throwing herself into her friend's arms. "Oh, Lady Mary, I am so happy, so very, very happy, and it is all owing to you; for had I not been with you, I should never have known him, and he would never have known me. Oh, tell me it is no dream!"

And Lady Mary, truly and thoroughly delighted, did assure her that it was not only very possible, but perfectly true; that she had seen it a very long time; and that nothing in the world could please her more than that he should have come to the point, and that Minie was happy. Time flew in such discussion, and Lady Mary only left her to the delightful task of writing to Florence. Florence! could it be possible, she who had associated so long and intimately with Howard, had received his attentions, even the offer of his hand, and yet rejected him? Minie could not understand it. Had the sisters been together during the time of Howard's delusion, Florence could scarcely have concealed from Minie that her fancy, if not her feelings, had been captivated; but in the brief intervals that Florence was at home, his name was seldom more than casually mentioned. The more Minie thought on this subject, the more puzzled she became, until the mystery seemed solved by the recollections of Frank's fancy that Florence loved another. Whom she could have loved in preference to Howard, Minie could not imagine; her only wish was, that her sister could be as happy as herself, and she poured forth her whole heart in glowing words

Howard, meanwhile, had made his engagement known to Lord Edgemere and his family, receiving their warmest congratulations in return. The Earl alone looked grave: "You have acted with your usual honor,

Frank," he said; "but one person you seem to have forgotten—your father."

The young man started. He had forgotten, if not quite the existence of his father, certainly his peculiar prejudices.

"He surely can not, will not, condemn his only son to misery for paltry gold!" he exclaimed. "He has been kind in his own way to me. Surely he will not deny me this, when I shall one day have thousands; and my present allowance would, with a very little increase, support us both."

"Not quite in the style which is due to your wife, Frank; though it might perhaps more than satisfy yourself and Minie. Remember, you are still very young; little more than two-and-twenty, I believe. Do not make your engagement public till you have spoken with your father."

"And depend upon his caprice for my happiness, and that of Minie, which is infinitely dearer! Lord Edgemere, how can I do this?"

"What *do* you mean to do, my young friend? Marry without even the compliment of telling him your intentions?"

"No, no; of course not; but if I ask consent, I must abide by the decision."

"Which you fear will be against your wishes, by your hesitation to ask. Depend upon it, Frank, Minie Leslie has too fine a spirit, gentle as she seems, to wed you, if she is to be any cause of contention between you and your only parent. I wish you happy from my very heart, but I fear you have at present some difficulties in the way of being so. I tell you honestly, had I even thought of your joining us, Minie, sweet girl as she is, should not have been of our party. I love her too well to expose her wilfully to danger; but when you came, I could not send her away, or bid you decamp, though I have been in no little anxiety ever since."

"Never mind it, my dear lord," replied Howard, stopping his hasty walk across the room to face his friend, and laugh heartily at the perplexity marked in the Earl's features. "I am not a man to be daunted with difficulties, and such as these I *will* overcome. There is a boundary to filial duty as well as to parental authority; and when

the only objection to Minie Leslie is, that she has no portion, I will not let that come between us and our happiness. My father has surely not lost all sense of honor, of feeling, and of generosity; he will not be deaf to my appeal, and we shall be happy after all. So, for Heaven's sake, my lord, banish that grave face; it does not accord with my light heart at all."

"I hope you may be happy, Frank; but I wish you had been charmed with the heiress, Florence, instead of her portionless though lovely sister," answered the Earl, half laughing, in spite of himself; for Frank's gayety was infectious.

"For shame, my lord; you have grown money-loving and calculating as a worldling: I will disown your friendship," he rejoined, adding, as the Earl left the room, "Florence! no; I could never, never have loved Florence, that is quite clear. Now, had she accepted me, I might have found it out too late, and been either an unhappy, or, by drawing back, a dishonored man. I wish she were my sister; and she shall be, and then I may love and reverence her still. Engagement secret! Perhaps he is right—to all but Lord and Lady St. Maur; for the first is Minie's guardian, and the latter will think me a—a capricious fool, not knowing my own mind, so the sooner she knows it the better."

CHAPTER XLVII.

ALL FOR THE BEST, AS THE END WILL PROVE.

"WELL, Ida, what say you now? Penetrative as you are, I have the triumph in this instance," said Lord St. Maur, two or three days after the event of our last chapter, and holding up a letter triumphantly before her. "I sent Frank's letter to you, that I might not witness your defeat.'

"And yet you cannot restrain your triumph, Edmund a novel mode of sparing my feelings. However I am too provoked and disappointed to resent it. If I had but

Frank near us, what a lecture would I give him for his caprice and inconstancy! He writes as if he knew it too, yet ventures to excuse himself."

"I wonder he did that, for men in love seldom think of excusing themselves. After all, you are very severe, to charge him with caprice. What could the poor fellow do, rejected as he was so decidedly?"

"He ought to have seen there was something more in Florence than she revealed."

"And so he did, for he conquered his feelings at first, under the impression that Florence rejected him because she loved another."

"Impossible."

"Yet perfectly true. Read what he says," and he gave her his own letter.

She read it, then said sorrowfully, "My poor, poor Florence, would there had been the same delusion on your part as on his. Yet, if she had accepted him, I wonder if this would have been."

"Rather a difficult question. I imagine not; for I believe it is the consciousness of *being loved* which has so worked on Frank; and had he known that this was also the case with Florence, his delusion might have continued, till it became too truly love to waver or to change. Yet, perhaps, of the two, Minie is more suited to him."

"Do not say so, Edmund; I will not hear it. She is a fascinating creature, doubtless, but has not the high character of Florence."

"And that is the very reason. Were Howard five or six years older, Florence would be better suited for his wife; but, as it is, I still say he reverences more than he loves her. Sorrow and heavy cares have made her older than her years. Howard's peculiar disposition will be happier with a wife full of life, animation, and child-like simplicity, like Minie, than with her sister's higher tone of character. Minie's influence will remove the precocious gravity, which his uncomfortable home has engendered; and make him some years younger."

"And would not Florence?"

"Hardly. Have you seen Florence since post-time?

She has letters, and of course one from Minie: how will she bear it?"

"Nobly. I do believe that the idea of his happiness will, after a brief period of bitterness, enable her to meet it calmly; she is so persuaded now that it was right to act as she did, that I trust and pray that her unselfish devotedness will bear her up, and be its own reward. I confess I shrink from seeing her; I dread the anguish of that pale face infinitely more than words."

The Countess was spared the interview. On approaching her friend's room she encountered Ferrers, with a packet in her hand; it consisted of two letters, the envelope containing a few tremulous, scarcely legible lines, from Florence.

"You are no doubt aware of the contents of these letters, my dear friend," she wrote; "but if you are not—and indeed at all events, read them, and give me permission to spend this one day alone. I can see no one, not even you; for kindness and sympathy would utterly unnerve me for the task before me. Do not fear for me: I have prayed for this, that he might be happy; that I might have the power of furthering that happiness; and both are granted me. Ought I not to be content? I will be with you as usual to-morrow. Pray for me.

FLORENCE."

Lady St. Maur did grant her request; for though her heart yearned towards her, she felt it was wiser as she had herself decided. She opened the letters sent for her perusal. Frank's was eloquent and manly; he alluded slightly to his feelings on quitting her, then to those which had led to his choosing the society of Minie; the gradual effect of that exquisite beauty, both of face and character, which Florence had so often described, upon his heart, yearning as it was to be beloved; and how, when he found that he was in truth the object of that young heart's first preference, he had felt that with her he might be happy.

"You refused me that which I craved," he continued:

"that which, had it been granted, hallowed by your love must have made me happy even as I am now, refused it so decidedly that I might not even hope; for I felt, suffering as it was then so to feel, that the heart I sought was the property of another. Florence! I appeal to you now for the gentle being who possesses all your traits of excellence in addition to her own; and, joy of all joys, she loves me! Give me the happiness of calling you my sister; for as such, like my own Minie, I shall reverence and love you Grant me the gift of your sweet sister, the blessing of your sympathy, and would, oh would to heaven, that our united love could give you the happiness which you will bestow on us."

Had Florence rejected Howard simply because she did not love him, this letter would only have excited pleasurable sensations. Frank wrote solely because his regard for Florence was such that he felt it would increase his happiness to receive it so far from her hand. He had never suspected even for a single minute, that there existed any other cause for his rejection than that her affections were pre-engaged; and he feared, from her manner, unhappily. Florence read this belief, in the whole tone and spirit of his letter; and the poor girl blessed God for his delusion.

From that day's agony we shall not attempt to lift the veil. No doubt there will be many who will think that Florence had no need to make the sacrifice, and therefore deserved all she suffered; but to those who have no belief in the sacred nature of those impulses that the voice of God sometimes speaks within us, we do not write. Minie's letter was indeed the very embodying of joy; had it alluded but to her own feelings, Florence might have read it calmly; but there were passages such as these—

"And this noble being had not the power to rivet your affections, dearest Florence, though he sought them; and I feel, as if with your higher, nobler, qualities, you would, you must have suited him better than your simple sister; yet he loves me, I *know* he does, all undeserving as I am. He tells me my affection soothed the pain which your rejection caused, and that I can make his happiness. Oh, what unutterable joy! How could you have associated

with him so long, so intimately, and yet not love him? It can only be that, from your manner he fancies that you love another. Oh, if it should be so—and, unhappily, my own darling sister, my very joy seems to reproach me—how can I be happy when you are in sorrow? And yet, yet there is a glowing light around me, a strange elasticity upon me, which I cannot define. I can only know, only feel, that this is deeper, dearer bliss than I have ever felt before!"

Could such passages be read unmoved? She looked back on her interview with Howard, and wondered how it had been—how she could possibly so have spoken, so appeared as completely to delude. It seemed as if some fate or destiny (why should we use such words?) some divine power had been at work around them all, making circumstances as they then were. To her, all the period, from her discovery of the secret papers to her illness, was a blank, peopled only by undefined spectres of embodied pain. What she had said to Howard was so completely obliterated that not even a word would return. Had he really even loved her, or was it all a dream? But why should she feel bitterness? Could she regret aught which could assure his happiness, even at the cost of deeper suffering to herself? No! and in those hours of agonized struggle, she thought of things which the excited Howard had forgotten, and before that day closed, the high-minded woman had resolved on a plan which would remove all those objections to their union, that she too truly anticipated from Lord Glenvylle's character must arise.

Florence appeared in the parlor, and officiated at the breakfast-table as usual the next morning, though her whole countenance bore such vivid traces of suffering that Sir Ronald Elliott could do nothing but gaze and commiserate imagining it a return of the bodily ailing to which his cousin had told him she was then subject. She joined in the general conversation, and smiled away all Sir Ronald's fears and regrets, and seemed resolved, by neither word, sign, nor look, to betray what she had endured. Of the two, Lady St. Maur was much more silent than Florence; she regarded her with astonishment

so mingled with veneration, that she could not speak on indifferent subjects; she recalled the lively, happy being of St. John's, whose very nature appeared as if it must be crushed by the first heavy blow, that her spirits were too elastic to *endure*, and that the blow would *snap*, not *bend*. Yet what had she become? To give her sympathy words were impossible; but when alone with Florence, she could not resist clasping those cold hands in both hers, and pressing a long, long kiss upon that colorless cheek, whispering in intense emotion, "My noble Florence, God in mercy give you peace; you have my prayers." And Florence's aching head sank for a brief interval on her bosom, as if to thank her for that blessed meed of sorrow,—silent sympathy; but composure soon returned.

Two or three days afterwards, Florence mentioned that her estate of Woodlands being now vacant, she should like to visit it, and see if it could be made a desirable residence: as she wished her sister to have a home suited to her future prospects. Her consent and sympathy had, of course, been written to Minie, including a message to Howard; for write to him she could not.

Lady St. Maur thought the exertion too much for her, but yielded at length to Florence's assurance that exertion was much more likely to do her good than harm. She hoped not to be absent more than a month or six weeks at farthest. Ferrers received orders for the necessary preparations, and within the week Lord St. Maur himself accompanied her to her estate. He was just the kind but unobtrusive friend she needed; feeling deeply for her, yet never in any jarring manner proving that he did so. He gave her the advantage of his advice and taste, and when he left her, which he did after ten days' sojourn, assured his wife she need feel no uneasiness for Florence; he was certain that her spirit would carry her through it all.

"Till Minie and Frank are happy," was the reply, "and then God in his infinite mercy alone can save her from sinking to the grave. She is under excitement now; wait till that is over ere we can pronounce upon her strength."

Lady St. Maur was right; Florence was under excite

ment; she herself knew not how powerfully. She knew her individual lot was, and must be for some time, that of suffering; and, therefore, steadfastly turning from all weakening reflection, gave up her whole being to the hope and endeavor to secure the happiness of those she loved. She entered into the minutest particular of furnishing, arranging, and housekeeping, which needed to begin from the very beginning. She interested herself in all those *little things* which some women, during her heavy trial, would have shrunk from, as heightening beyond all endurance the one absorbing agony, by pricks as of pins and thorns.

Neither Watson nor Ferrers, nor the old housekeeper of Woodlands, ever spoke of their young lady but with praise and admiration. Ferrers indeed, from the fact of her sudden illness, and the words which escaped from its delirium, might have suspected there was more to cause her delicate health than met the eye; but she was not one to speak her surmises: and when a sweetly-toned voice and gentle smile ever marked the smallest intercourse with her domestics; when she suggested, or thankfully accepted suggestion, for improvements both in the house and grounds, and so cheerfully entered into every minute detail, how could even more penetrating persons than old Watson and Mrs. Bulling imagine more than they saw? Ill in health, how could that be, when she could make any exertion if it were needed, and endure such fatigue? Pale she was indeed; her very lips were seen to lose their ruby tint, and her dark eyes to grow strangely dim; but the Hampshire air would bring back the bonny rose, and they must look out for some one, a right noble gentleman, for her to wed; and then her smiles would not sink upon the heart, as they sometimes did, making them feel sad, they knew not why, but be glad and cheerful as her voice. So, often gossiped those who delighted in calling Miss Leslie mistress; and when Sir Ronald Elliott made his appearance at Woodlands, laden, he declared, with commissions from the Countess—else he had not dared intrude on Miss Leslie's privacy—they fixed upon him at once as the cavalier they wanted.

That the gallant young sailor should make himself

friends amongst all the tenantry at Woodlands was not very wonderful, as British sailors are generally greeted with joy wherever they come; but that he should choose to quit Amersley in such a dull, damp, uninviting season as November, and make a pilgrimage to Woodlands, for literally nothing but his own pleasure, would have been much more extraordinary to Florence, had not her mind been too pre-occupied to think about it. That her pale face, from which she imagined every trace of any previous attraction must have departed, joined as it was to a manner so spiritless, a form so faded, could have any fascination for one so buoyant, so life-loving as the young Captain, was a circumstance in itself so wholly improbable, as never for one moment to have entered her thoughts. Yet that face and form had haunted Sir Ronald from the first evening he had seen her; he saw—nay, Lady St. Maur had told him—that she was in deep affliction; and he felt an interest rising towards her in a most incomprehensible manner, and became restless and weary. To the amusement of his relatives, he declared he would take a run down to Old London, and call at Woodlands, in case he could do any thing for Miss Leslie, in his way. Take Woodlands in his way? He might know his road across the Atlantic, Lady St. Maur told him, but certainly not over England, if he talked of going through Hampshire in the straight road from Warwick to London. He did not care, go he would; Miss Leslie must be sick of her loneliness, and he would go and cheer her, and bring her back, vowing that Constance, though she had a governess all to herself, was unbearable without the influence of Florence.

"Bring her back if you can; I give you free permission: but whether your company, most gallant Captain, will cheer her loneliness, or whether it would be quite proper that it should, I will not pretend to say. However, if you bring her back, you are quite welcome to go," was Lady St. Maur's parting address, and Sir Ronald forthwith went.

Florence was not quite ready to return to Amersley, and Sir Ronald declared he would go to Portsmouth meanwhile; but, somehow or other, there were several things for

which Florence was waiting, and which ought long before to have arrived from London, and Florence's movements were retarded by their non-arrival; so to London the Captain went, and by his sailor-like bustle and activity, all that was needed came down to Hampshire in a marvellously short space of time; and, this accomplished, he hovered about the neighborhood of Woodlands, his vicinity perfectly unknown to Florence, and, just before Christmas, escorted her back to Amersley, with the most brother-like cordiality imaginable.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE HOUR OF TRIAL.

Lord Edgemere's family, including Frank Howard and Minie Leslie, had arrived in Warwickshire before Florence returned, and Lady St. Maur had driven over to see them. Nothing as yet had alloyed the happiness of Minie, for Frank had found it impossible to impart to her his fears regarding his father. Florence had heard repeatedly from her sister, and answered her letters while at Woodlands. She had nerved her mind to read those letters, radiant as they were with love and joy, again and yet again, till the bitter pangs which they caused were so entirely conquered that she could peruse them from beginning to end without any visible emotion. She compelled herself to think of meeting them, of looking once more on Howard, and as the betrothed husband of another; she thought of it till every feeling of her own was conquered, and she believed herself nerved to meet them so calmly, so collectedly, that not a change of color or quivering of voice should be betrayed. But suspense, or rather the anticipation of trial, was intolerable, and she therefore wisely resolved to meet it at once.

"Florence, you know not what you undertake; be advised, there can be no need for it so soon," urged Lady St. Maur; but Florence's determination was not to be shaken.

"We must meet," she answered, sadly, yet firmly, "why should I defer it? Am I so weak that I cannot see the fulfillment of my earnest prayers without evincing emotion? No, let me try my strength, and then I can better judge myself, and know how to proceed."

And accordingly, as soon as the weather permitted, they went to Beech Vale. Florence was received with the warmest cordiality by all the family; the change which they supposed her severe illness had occasioned was sincerely regretted, and warm congratulations on her own legacy and her sister's happy prospects followed.

"Minie and Frank are in the east room; pray make no compliments, dear Florence, but join them when you like. Minie is all impatience to see you, and wondered what you could find to detain you so long at Woodlands, in this miserable season," Lady Mary said, after some little time elapsed in ordinary conversation. "Frank only returned from London last night; I have seen him but a few minutes this morning, and I fear that all is not as right as it should be—his face was somewhat overshadowed."

It was well she said this; for now the hour of trial had come, Florence had felt for the moment as if she could not meet it; but recalled by Lady Mary's unconscious intimation of what she herself had long anticipated, her strength of mind and purpose triumphed, and with unfaltering steps she quitted the apartment.

In the east room, as directed, she found them, but the voice, not of joy, but of sorrow, met her ear; and so engrossed were those she sought in their own thoughts, that she stood for some time unobserved. Frank was pacing the chamber with most uneven steps, his cheek highly colored and his eye flashing. Minie's arms were resting on the table, her head laid upon them, in an attitude of complete despondency, while her whole frame shook with sobs. Her beautiful hair hanging loosely over her, concealed her face from her sister; but Florence knew that gentle nature too well to need further proof of suffering than what she beheld.

"Cruel, unjust, capricious!" were the first words she heard, in Frank's most agitated voice. "With his hoards of untouched gold, why should he want more? Why is

my happiness to be blighted simply because an unjust parent refuses his consent to my wedding a portionless bride? Minie, come what will, you must, you SHALL be mine! With or without his consent, I will claim the promise you have made me. Are we to suppress our united happiness for no cause? for this refusal assigns none. My father has no right to gall me thus! I will not bear it. What can money or title give me more than I possess already? I seek happiness and love, not ambition. Minie, my own sweet love! do not weep thus; we shall be happy in each other yet."

"No, Frank, no!" replied Minie, pushing back her long hair, which was wet with tears, and looking up in his face, as he bent over her and clasped his arms around her. "No, precious as your love is, I will not come between you and your parent. If he cannot receive me as his daughter, if he thinks reverence and love—for I would give him both—are nothing worth, compared to gold, how can I, how dare I burden you with me? No, no! I love you too well to expose you to your father's wrath. We must wait; perhaps—" but her sweet voice faltered as she spoke—"he will relent after a time, and then—"

"Relent!" muttered Frank, even while he passionately kissed the upturned brow, as if to thank her for the half-whispered hope; "I never knew him relent when once he had so spoken. Why did I not marry the heiress, forsooth? he asked me; as if his son had power to woo and wed whomsoever he pleased. Florence!" he abruptly exclaimed, as, lifting his head at the moment, he met her meek and gentle gaze; "good God, how changed! how ill you must have been!"

"But I am well now, Mr. Howard, perfectly well; therefore pray do not judge me by my looks," she replied, meeting his glance with one as ready, if not more free from agitation than his own; and then she bent down to imprint repeated kisses on the cheek of her sister, who, at Frank's first exclamation, had sprung into her arms. "Minie, darling, I did not expect a greeting of tears, come, smile. We have not met for a long time, and I have been ill, and you have been happy; ought you not

to welcome me like your own sweet self? What is this weighty grief? Mr. Howard, treat me as the sister you have called me, and tell me the particulars of what I so imperfectly heard. Lord Glenvylle objects to my sister as your bride because she has no portion; is that it? An evil easily remedied, since, thanks to Mrs. Rivers's generosity, my sister is not portionless. I should have looked to this long ago had not illness prevented me; but now let me know all."

Frank seized her hand, and pressed it energetically to his lips. If it trembled, and was somewhat hastily withdrawn, he was too much excited to notice it. We will give the substance of his tale in our own words, as there were some points which, in his relation, he purposely omitted.

His father had insisted he should break off his engagement, for that his consent to his union with any but an heiress, and one who could give him either name and title, or the means of purchasing them, should *never* be obtained. In vain Frank urged that he had already a name, and a proud one; that his father's title was sufficient to content him. He was not ambitious, and should abhor owing more to his wife than domestic happiness and love. Why should Lord Glenvylle dwell so much on a pecuniary portion for his son's bride, when his wealth was already so enormous, and he, Frank, wished not for a shilling more than his present handsome allowance? Lord Glenvylle was too cold and dignified a person to give any violent sign of anger; but he grew prouder and prouder, colder and colder, till his son felt as if he were addressing a statue, and his excited spirits sunk back so chilled, that it was an effort to urge more. Yet still he spoke, for his love was too deep to be banished by a parent's word. He said that he was convinced Minie would not be portionless; her sister was not one to hoard her lavish wealth: and then it was (though Howard did not repeat it to Florence) that the Viscount scornfully bade him woo the heiress instead of her sister! The possessor of Woodlands, its rich pasture-lands and woody inclosures might be a fit wife for his son. A portion! Lord Glenvylle laughed at the idea. Miss Leslie had been too lately made an heiress

to give away any part of her possessions; and even if she did, nothing that she could settle on her sister short of the inheritance itself would endow her sufficiently to be Frank Howard's bride. There was alike scorn and satire in every word; perhaps there was more, but icy pride was a veil too invulnerable for his agitated son to penetrate He used all his eloquence, yet never forgetting the respect he always paid his father; but his kindly feelings felt withered within him, and—when that interview ended by a solemn declaration, on the part of Lord Glenvylle, that if Mr. Francis Howard persisted in wedding a portionless girl, his allowance would be stopped on the instant, and he would find himself without a shilling wherewithal to support himself or bride; so let him ponder ere he decided—Frank left his presence without uttering a word, for speak he could not. The hot blood had mounted to his very brow, and he bit his nether lip in the effort to strain the bursting passion, till the blood came; but he conquered himself. Lord Glenvylle, in the solitary moments of remorse which followed Frank's departure, could not recall one word in which his son had forgotten their relative positions of child and parent.

"Love? pooh! he will soon get over it," so his lordship thought, as he sat alone; "but why should I thwart him thus? Why! merciful heavens! if he knew what is consuming me—that I require an heiress for him because wealth gold, another title, may enable him to rise up against the blow which one day I know will fall, and on him, to punish his miserable, guilty father. How know I that he will inherit the rank to which he now looks forward? I dare not call them his, for I know not who may come to claim them; and yet he believes I do not feel for him, I do not love him—the only being who saved me from seeking death by my own hand. Frank, my boy! my poor, poor boy! the truth would be his death."

And could Frank have heard the groans and sobs which followed this soliloquy, he would have been spared one bitter feeling; for he must have been convinced that he was an object of love, however strangely and mysteriously that love was proved. But he could not know this, and while more and more painfully the conviction pressed upon

him that even the small portion of affection which he believed his father had once borne him, must have dwindled away beneath what appeared only an increasing love of gold, his heart, wounded and suffering, clung yet more fondly to the only being on earth by whom he could believe himself beloved. Break from her now! dissolve his engagement! bid her, like himself, languish in all the lingering torture of hope deferred! he could not, he would not! No, did he even forget his birth, and seek some honest business which could support them both.

In this mood he remained in London about four-and-twenty hours, and then galloped back to Beech Vale. It was easy, even for indifferent persons, to discover that all was not right; and Minie, unsuspicious of all evil as she generally was, found some difficulty in preserving her joyous spirits until their being alone permitted her to draw from him the cause. Frank had intended to conceal, or at least to soften, the facts, but his nature was much too impetuous. Miserable himself, and therefore longing for sympathy and affection, he poured out his whole soul to his betrothed. Minie was not one to bear up against an unexpected blow with fortitude. She did not utter a syllable of complaint, but she clung to him, and wept unrestrainedly. Her grief of course heightened Frank's more tumultuary feelings, and occasioned the passionate burst which Florence had overheard.

Although Howard did not enter into all these particulars, he related enough for Florence perfectly to comprehend the fact. Perhaps her own previous cogitations on this subject rendered her more than usually clear-sighted Be that as it may, though she did not betray her intentions, the time passed with the lovers was not without its fruit. She left them soothed and hopeful; they scarcely knew wherefore, and their every feeling of love and veneration heightened towards herself.

To the astonishment of Lord and Lady St. Maur, the following morning Florence announced an intention of visiting London for a week or two.

"At this season, with every appearance of snow setting in for weeks, and blocking up the roads! My dear Florence, you are certainly mad to think of it. exclaimed

the Countess, half jesting and half in earnest. "What business can you have so important as not to wait a more favorable season? Do be advised. Strong as you think yourself, and are mentally, physically you certainly are not, and I feel inclined to lay a positive command on you to stay at home."

"Pray do not, dearest Lady St. Maur, for indeed in this case I can not obey you. Affairs of consequence to Minie's happiness call me to London, and must not be delayed."

"Minie!" repeated the Countess, and her tone was most unusually impatient. Florence understood it.

"Yes, Minie, my dear friend. Her happiness is now mine, all that at present, at least, is left to me. Do not grudge my securing that, even though the manner of doing so may seem unwise. I cannot now explain my meaning, only trust me till my return, and you shall know all."

There was an earnestness in her manner impossible to be gainsayed; and accepting only the escort of the faithful Ferrers, Florence set off for London, to Sir Ronald Elliott's great disappointment, scarcely ten days after her return from Woodlands.

CHAPTER XLIX.

LORD GLENWYLLE.—THE SACRIFICE.

It was one of those dull, cheerless mornings of January, the snow falling at intervals, and the wind so cold and cutting that few, except those unhappy pedestrian teachers who are compelled to bear all weathers, would have ventured out. There had been a heavy fall of snow, and then a thaw, and then as rapid a frost, so that the thoroughfare had the semblance of dirty glass. Folks could not walk fast for fear of falling, and so they shuffled and fretted along, shivering with the nipping wind, and looking, from their purple cheeks, red noses, and watery eyes, the very caricatures of misery; for cold, though one of the worst evils to encounter, is the most ludicrous to witness, and the unfortunate sufferers receive little sympathy from their warmly-clad and warmly-sheltered observers.

From a small morning-room in one of the mansions in Belgrave Square, however, the cold was so effectually excluded that it had almost the atmosphere of summer. The sole inmate of this comfortable retreat was a man very little more than fifty, if years could be counted by the figure, which even in a sitting posture was unusually erect and dignified; his face told another tale, not so much, perhaps, of years, but of passions and their consequences, making him old before his time. The countenance had been unusually handsome, but it was indented by those strong lines about the brow and mouth—the sure indexes of strong passions, held under forcible restraint by some feeling yet stronger than themselves. His eyes were large, dark, and piercing; but so seldom now permitted to become expressive, that their natural brightness never destroyed the stony calmness of the other features. His whole appearance was that of a solemn statue, to whom the feelings and passions of mankind were now as things unknown, and never, to the recollection of any of his domestics, had this solemn rigidity been disturbed. Days, weeks, years, left him untouched in outward appearance, except by mingling his raven hair more profusely with gray, and deepening the lines upon his brow. He seldom encountered the eyes of his fellows, for he lived absolutely alone, isolated at first by his own choice, and next by the dislike of those whom he had scorned. He was dressed with care, but plainly, and there was an absence of all pretension about the room, which seemed to denote that he cared little for outward things: his whole world was WITHIN, and terrible, indeed, at times, were the tempests and convulsions of that world. That, though devoid of pretension, his apartment was almost luxurious in comfort, was little owing to himself: his housekeeper, incited by her much-loved young master, had so cautiously and gradually rendered it thus, that it grew upon him unconsciously.

He was accused of parsimony, perhaps with justice; but a miser he was not. Hoard wealth he did, strangely and engrossingly, and none could guess wherefore: but we must check this long digression, for though without Lord Glenvylle our tale would have no connection, he is

too little known to our readers for more particular notice, especially as our fast diminishing space warns us loudly to conclude.

It was near three o'clock, when a footman entered, his face so expressive of astonishment, that any one but Lord Glenvylle must have demanded its cause.

"My lord; a lady, my lord, wishes to speak with your lordship. She will take no denial."

Lord Glenvylle's face was always pale, or it might have appeared to become yet more so; but, to the man's increasing wonder, his master stared him in the face without attempting reply.

"Shall I show her in here, my lord, or into the drawing-room; she is close behind me;" and the lady, whoever she might be, entered, supposing she had been sufficiently announced, ere one syllable of reply had passed Lord Glenvylle's lips.

He rose involuntarily; for no seclusion, no eccentricity could conquer the habits of the English gentleman, still so strong within. He fixed a glance on his visitor, with an emotion which, could it be possible, seemed like alarm. She was standing in the shade, for the room was thickly curtained, and three o'clock in January is little more than twilight: her veil of black crape—for she was in mourning—was raised indeed, but still hung so much over her face, as almost to conceal it; and however little satisfaction his penetrative glance could afford him, it permitted Lord Glenvylle to recover his voice and his cold, repelling manner.

"I am honored," he said, sarcastically, as his domestic quitted the room: "it is seldom that a lady deigns to enliven my apartments with her presence. May I crave the reason of this unusual honor, and the name of my fair visitant?"

"I am come to answer both, my lord," replied a voice of such soul-subduing gentleness, that he winced beneath it. "I fear I intrude, but a very brief interval of attention will suffice me; my name is Florence Leslie, and it is on account of your son, though *not sent* by him, that I am here."

His face, which had appeared about to relax, became

stone again; but he motioned her to a chair, and sat down again himself.

"Leslie? Florence Leslie? My son's betrothed bride, perchance, for such I believe was the name, come to plead her own cause with the iron-hearted father. Madam, you should have tried some other method; I am not one to melt at woman's tears."

"Nor am I one to shed them, my lord," she answered with a dignity which involuntarily commanded respect, "nor would the chosen bride of your noble son demean herself in the manner which you are pleased to believe. No, Lord Glenvylle, I am not Frank Howard's chosen bride, but the sister of that bride; come hither not to plead, but simply to know if, indeed, the decree you have pronounced be irrevocable, as they believe it; or, if by any exertion, any sacrifice on my part, it can be changed. My lord, I am perchance, too bold; this intrusion upon one so retired, so removed from the world—perhaps from the feelings of the world—as yourself, may well be regarded as unmaidenly, or, to say the least, unwise; but when the whole heart is intent on the furtherance of one object, idle forms are wont to be rejected, and we think only of that which we so earnestly wish to gain."

Lord Glenvylle looked at her with surprise, and his tone was somewhat less sarcastic as he answered—"In this instance, Madam, it is a subject of regret that so much enthusiasm should be wasted. My decision is, as my son justly believes, irrevocable."

"And wherefore, my lord? Pardon me, but as your affection for your son has never been doubted, I cannot believe that a mere prejudice should obtain such an ascendency. You would not condemn Mr. Howard to unhappiness, without some very powerful reason. My sister's birth is, indeed, not noble; but for aught else, my lord, she may vie with the highest and the noblest of the land. See her, know her, and let her gentle virtues, and your son's affection, plead for both."

"You are eloquent, Miss Leslie; I doubt not but that the object of your interest is deserving of all praise. Prejudice against herself I have none. My son must marry; I care little whom, so he is happy. His wife will be as

little worth to me as others of her sex. I am not what men term ambitious, for did a prince's daughter win his love, without the power of making him, if need be, other than he is, my refusal to such a union were unchangeable as now."

"Forgive me, my lord; but seeking, as I do, the happiness of one so dear, this mysterious answer can not satisfy me. You own that no prejudice actuates you against my sister; you say that you are not ambitious, that you seek but your son's happiness, and yet you refuse to permit it. A prince's daughter can scarcely cause the same objection as my sister—she would have both birth and fortune—and yet your refusal would extend to her. How, then, can I obviate objections, which seem so contradictory? I am rich, my lord, and can well afford to make my sister rich. Name that portion which will endow her sufficiently to be the bride of your son, and, if it be within my income, it is hers."

"Riches have not been long yours, they tell me, yet you would part with them. Strange, most strange!" replied Lord Glenvylle, musingly; "yet, perhaps, not so; they have not been long enough your own for you to know their value. Madam, take advice, ponder on their worth ere you offer to part with them."

"Value—worth! talk you of the value of gold, compared with the value of happiness, the enjoyment of bestowing it? My lord, my lord, how little you have read the human heart!"

"I have read too much of it," he exclaimed, starting up with sudden emotion, and pacing the chamber; "too much of it; I have read its annals in my own, and they are black—black as the thoughts that torture! Pshaw, this is folly, what can have moved me thus? a voice, a woman's voice. Can I not hear it yet in peace? away with the weak folly! Human heart! Aye, I have read it—read but its dark page."

"Then read another now, my lord" replied Florence, meekly, subduing with an effort the alarm which his manner, almost that of madness, caused. "Look beyond the black veil you have cast before you. Surely, surely, in the heart of your son may be read whole pages of noble-

ness, virtue, truth, which might give a fairer, lovelier face to humanity. Did you look but there, the glow of that heart would dissolve the clouds you deem so black within your own."

Lord Glenvylle paused abruptly before her. "Why did he not love you?" he muttered, "it is strange that any one but those deluded by love should so read a human heart. Why not trust his happiness to one so capable, it would seem, of appreciating and securing it? If he had, there would have been no need of all this; I had consented without a word."

"And why so honor me, my lord, and yet refuse my sister—younger, fairer, in all things more fitted to be his bride? I do beseech you, alter this decision. Say but what portion will make my sister in your eyes worthy, as you are pleased to deem myself, and again I say it shall be hers."

"Madam, I know not how it can be; you are an heiress, she is nothing; and an heiress only, with my consent, shall Francis Howard wed."

"And were Minie Leslie heiress in the stead of Florence Leslie, would all objection be removed? I conjure you to reply. Is it but this, to become an heiress, and your consent to your son's choice is gained?"

"Madam, I repeat it is only this"—Florence clasped her hands with sudden joy—"Aye," he added, sarcastically, for his nature imagined not her meaning, "transfer your newly-acquired inheritance to the sister you so profess to love, and she shall be Frank Howard's bride; will romantic enthusiasm permit so great a sacrifice? The world must change its nature first."

"Do you speak in earnest, my lord, or is it but sarcastic jest? Oh! do not trifle with feelings such as these," she entreated, gazing on him with eyes which riveted his upon hers. Her veil and bonnet had fallen back, and, for the first time, her pale face was fully revealed. "Tell me, I beseech you, promise me, that if I do this, there shall be no more objection nor denial, and that Minie Leslie shall be your son's bride."

Engrossed in her own emotion, she saw not that damp drops had started to Lord Glenvylle's brow, and that he

had sunk back in his chair, as if faint with some sudden pain, and passing his hand across his brow, had muttered —"Fool, fool! what right have I to parley thus with women? I have forsworn them; they are all spectres of the past; like or unlike the same!" and again he started up, and strode across the room. Florence repeated her words, for it seemed as if he had not caught their sense; and then he paused, when every feature which had been a moment since convulsed and working, became rigid as its wont.

"I have said it, madam; were my son's choice an heiress, my consent had never been withheld."

"You will promise this, my lord."

"Aye, in black and white, if it so please you." She turned hastily to the table, as if eagerly accepting the proposal, then paused. "No; not yet. I will not claim it now. My lord, I ask but your word, and your honor is sufficient for my trust. Promise me, as a gentleman, whose simple word shall be far more sacred than the mere stroke of pen, that if I bring earnest of my sincerity in this matter, strange as it may seem to you, you will not fail in yours. You will grant freely and fully the consent I claim, and by no word or sign embitter the blessing which you give. Promise me this; grant me one more interview, it shall be briefer than this has been, and with my presence I will trouble you no more."

"Miss Leslie, mysterious and incomprehensible being, I do give you this promise, and it shall be sacredly, solemnly observed; you may trust me; your words and manner are too solemn for the jest I deemed them. Yet it can not be: there never yet was human nature disinterested as this. Pause, ponder, weigh, ere romance becomes reality; you will not be able to retrace this step when once taken. Think that there will be no return, no gratitude; build no delusive hope on the belief that generosity, devotedness, have power to purchase love. Those you seek to serve are too much wrapt in each other to spare one grain of love for you; hope it not; look not for it; you will reap but ashes. I am not ambitious. No, no." He grasped her arm, and his face became livid. "Miss Leslie, there is a cause for this seeming

tyranny; my boy knows it not, may never know it; but he may need change of name, change of heritage. You think me mad—be it so; let his wife give him these, and whoever she be, I care not. Go—go, make him happy! My boy! —my Frank, and—and God bless you."

His grasp on her arm became literally convulsed; he glared in her face, and rushed from the room.

Florence looked after him, bewildered, terrified, for she felt convinced that words, look, and manner were all madness. Was she right in trusting to a promise from one seeming so little capable of keeping it? Surely it was something more than the mere eccentricity for which he was noted. His words had chilled her heart, but not her purpose. But though the glow of enthusiasm had been darkened, the sustaining impulse remained. What was the sacrifice of riches, to that of heart which she had already made? There was neither pause nor doubting in her purpose. Strangely as he had spoken, she yet firmly believed that Lord Glenvylle would not deceive her. In her hands, as she had prayed, was the happiness or misery of him she loved.

CHAPTER L.

FRANK AND MINIE HAPPY.

TEN days sufficed for Florence effectually to conclude the business which had brought her to London; and on her return she found a merry party assembled at Amersley Hall. Lord Edgemere's family had at length accepted Lord St. Maur's often-proffered invitation, and Frank Howard and Minie Leslie were of course of the party. The joyous face of the latter was already dimmed by anxiety; duty suggested the propriety of separating herself from Howard, till his father's objections could be surmounted; but this was an act of heroism for which her nature was too simple, and her love too powerful, for her to carry it into effect; opposed too, as it was, by Lady Mary, who violently protested against Lord Glenvylle'

tyranny, and vowed that it should not be regarded. Frank, she said was old and wise enough to choose and decide for himself.

Lady St Maur had half wished, for Florence's sake, that Lord Edgemere's visit had been concluded before she returned, or, at least, that Frank should have left the party. Something in her expressive features must have betrayed this, as she affectionately greeted her, for Florence answered her thoughts.

'Do not fear for me, my kind friend," she said, as they sat alone in the Countess's *boudoir;* "I feel as if I were strengthened to see him, speak with him, even with pleasure, for I have made him happy: he will not, shall not know how, until—" she paused a moment, as if gathering firmness—"until he is my sister's husband, and cannot impose upon me the suffering of any resistance to my wishes. Oh! Lady St. Maur, you said once—'I should rejoice in Mr. Rivers's unexpected generosity.' Rejoice! my wildest dream had not pictured its bringing me happiness like this."

"Florence! what have you done?" inquired the Countess, startled almost into consciousness; "you cannot have been so foolish as to——." Florence's hand was gently laid on her mouth.

"Do not you call it foolish, Lady St. Maur, or you will forswear yourself, for you have said, there may be such a thing as making our own happiness by securing that of others. Oh! do not—do not chide your poor Florence for this. What can I look to for personal happiness? What can my thousands bring to me but increase of care? I have known only misery since they became mine; not indeed through them, but they have become so associated with suffering, that I loathe their very name. Why should it be folly then to act as I have done, to go back to that station in which I was so happy? Dependent, indeed I am not. No, no! Had I not reserved that which I felt was sufficient for my need, aye, for doing what little good I can, they would have pressed it on me; I should have been compelled to look one day for return, for gratitude from those whom I had served; and that, that I could not do. Dearest Lady St. Maur," she exclaimed with in-

creasing agitation, "do not refuse me this: let me still retain the station I have occupied in your family—the best. Oh! how much the best for me! How could I have mingled with the world, or performed what is naturally expected from Mrs. Rivers's heiress, with the bitter consciousness of what I am? Should I not feel more and more painfully that I was imposing myself upon the world for what I am not? But in your household, still your chosen friend, Lady Helen's companion, aiding you in rearing your sweet children to be like yourself. There may be happiness in store for me yet, or at least calmness, cheerfulness, peace. Oh! do not say I have acted unwisely; I have made no sacrifice; done nothing I could wish undone; indeed, indeed, I have not. Let me live with you, be your lowly Florence still;" and a burst of passionate tears choked that eloquent appeal.

Lady St. Maur could not condemn, could not say one word against a resolution which, formed as some cold-hearted people might deem it on mere romantic enthusiasm, had yet been acted upon with a forethought and deliberation which precluded all idea of after-regret. She endeavored only to soothe her friend's unwonted excitement. She promised that all should be as she wished. She would not condemn, would not refuse her sanction to it, however such decision, on the part of Florence, might occasion her regret.

Before the dressing-bell sounded, Lord St. Maur and Lord Edgemere were summoned to the Countess's *boudoir*, and Florence answered so calmly, so decisively, all their prudent arguments, to prove that her course of acting was neither wise nor positively demanded, and, therefore, she might still repent it, that they found it was useless to persist, and acquiesced, though with regret, in all she desired, promising to take all further law business out of her hands, and so contrive it that the bridegroom elect should, as she particularly wished, be ignorant of his bride's fortune till his wedding-day.

To Lord Edgemere, this resolution was a subject alike of astonishment and mystery. To Lord St. Maur it was neither. He could understand the feeling which dictated this line of conduct, and how painfully she would shrink

from any thing of publicity or notoriety attending it; and while he regretted the decision, he honored her with a larger portion of reverence and esteem than he believed any woman could have had power to excite, except his wife; and he inwardly blushed at the idle prejudice which, even for an hour, could have suggested the idea of banishing such a being from the friendship of his Ida.

"I bring you news, joyous news, my gentle sister," exclaimed Florence, after completing the business of the toilet, and finding her sister in a favorite sitting-room, opening into the greenhouse; "give that to Mr. Howard —to Frank," she added, determined to pronounce his name, "and see if its mystic characters have not power to change that anxious look into your former sweet smiles."

Frank was not far off; and overhearing Florence's words, bounded into the room again just as Minie, with a cry of joy, called upon his name. "My father's hand and seal!" he ejaculated, almost breathless. "Can he have relented—granted my request? Oh, it is impossible!" The letter was torn open as he stood, Minie clinging to his arm, and devouring with him its contents. For a full minute Florence calmly looked on them both; but when Frank suddenly caught Minie to his bosom, bursting forth into a wild, passionate cry of joy, her heart turned sick, and every pulse stood still. A minute, and the pang passed; and well it was, for the next moment Frank was at her side, clasping her hand, and pouring forth thanks, blessings, inquiries, all in a breath; while Minie could only throw herself on her neck and weep for very joy.

"Be satisfied, my dear friend," she said, when he permitted her to speak, and her voice was quite calm; "I have gained Lord Glenvylle's unconditional consent. Nothing can now interfere with your happiness—indulge it without alloy; and let me enjoy the thought that I have gained it, without further question. Rest satisfied that to procure this consent I have done nothing that I can ever regret, nothing that has occasioned, or can occasion, me one moment's feeling which you, as a brother, could have wished otherwise. That my journey to London, and brief

detention there, was on your account, I will not deny; but do not ask me more, for indeed I will not answer."

Frank looked at her doubtingly, almost sorrowfully; but playful as was her manner, it was too decided to be evaded. "Tell me but one thing," he said, earnestly, "dearest Florence; only tell me that to obtain this consent, so unexpected, from one like my father, you have made no sacrifice to which your friends can object; tell me," he rejoined, taking both her hands and looking full in her face. "Florence I must have an answer, if you would not destroy my new-found happiness at once."

"Be answered, then," she said; "I have both the consent and assistance of my friends in all that I have done. And for your father, judge him not harshly; I am sure he loves you—seeks but your happiness. Now, will you be satisfied," she added, smiling, "or must I name the portion I have settled on your bride?"

"Perish the thought!" indignantly burst from Howard. "I would that she had none, none but her own lovely face, and lovelier mind; that the world might know there is one heart that can enshrine affection without a thought of that hated frame-work—gold!"

The first dinner-bell sounding at that moment, saved Florence all reply, Many of Lady St. Maur's guests being eager to welcome and converse with her, it was no very great matter of surprise that she should leave Frank and Minie to their own happiness, and find a seat during the remainder of the evening elsewhere.

It was a joyous evening in the halls of Amersley. Frank was so universally beloved, that the ban being removed from his happiness was a source of real rejoicing. The hours sped in the dance and song; though both grated somewhat harshly on the feelings of the noble hostess, for she knew how they must fall on the heart of one in that lordly room. She looked towards her friend, often tremblingly; but there was still a smile on her pale lip, and her eye was radiant. Was it but excitement? or would indeed her noble spirit carry her throughout, and create its own reward? She did not dance; but for that her late illness was sufficient excuse, and it elicited no remark. Sir Ronald Elliott preferred remaining by her

side, defending himself against all the raillery of his companions by declaring the dance was too landsman and too savage an exercise for him; and Florence alternately conversed with him and others of the elder guests, with all her wonted calm and earnest manner, on various subjects, the whole evening.

The 25th of March had been fixed for Lady Mary's wedding-day, and Frank was eloquent in his entreaties that Minie would consent to become his on the same morning. Lord Glenvylle (to whom Frank had flown on the wings of gratitude the day following Florence's return) was anxious for the speedy solemnization of his son's happiness. Lady Mary and Melford seconded his entreaties, laughingly desiring the *éclat* of a double marriage; and Florence, when appealed to by her blushing and trembling sister, advised the granting her lover's request. It was not quite a year after their mother's death, but so near it that the pleading another month of mourning had little effect on Frank's impatience. The 25th of March, then, was the day fixed; and, as Lady Mary was to be married from her father's house in London, whither they adjourned after leaving Amersley, Florence determined on taking a house in town for the two following months, that her sister's elegant *trousseau* might be prepared together with Lady Mary's, and all things relative to her marriage be conducted with the refined taste natural to Florence, and demanded by Minie's future prospects.

Lord and Lady St. Maur expected to be in London about the middle of February, and directly after her sister's marriage Florence was to return to them. More than this Minie did not require, satisfied with her sister's assurance that she should not be lonely—that in all she had done she had secured her individual happiness as far as it lay in her own power. Vainly Minie remonstrated that the rich materials selected for her *trousseau*—the elegant though simple ornaments which Florence presented to her, were unsuited to her station.

"Unsuited, and you the sister of an heiress! about to be the bride of the heir to a Viscountcy. Shame on you, dearest. I will not permit you to dispute my taste. As long as you are under my roof, you must submit to my

authority. When you leave that for the home of your husband, my beloved girl, spare me but your affection; let no circumstance, no accident come between my memory and your heart, and I will ask no more."

"Spare you my affection! Florence, dearest, kindest! can you think that aught of individual joy can lessen the ties, or diminish the affection of nearly nineteen years? Oh, have we not grown from childhood to youth together? together struggled against the ills of life? wept each other's sorrows, shared all returning joys? Have I not ever looked up to you as even more than a sister, and you on me as combining child and sister both? Love! oh, until death! no image, not even of husband or child, can come between us, Florence!" and overpowered with unusual emotion, Minie flung herself impetuously into her sister's arms, and wept.

CHAPTER LI.

THE DEED OF GIFT.

It was over; that day of smiles and tears, too full of feeling for entire joy, too twined with hope to be all sadness. We leave to others, more experienced in such matters, the task of dilating on the brilliant *coup d'œil* which St. Margaret's chapel, Westminster, presented on the occasion of the double marriage of the Right Honorable Alfred Melford to the Lady Mary Villiers, second daughter of the Earl of Edgemere; and that of the Honorable Francis Howard, M. P., son and heir to Viscount Lord Glenvylle, with Minie Leslie, younger daughter—so Lord St. Maur expressly inserted in the *Morning Post*—of Edward Leslie, Esquire, deceased. We have neither time nor inclination to enter into detail on the splendor of the dresses, the noble company, most of which were of the highest and loveliest of the aristocracy; the demeanor of the brides, and of their respective bridegrooms; the refined and high-born elegance of the elder bride, the resplendent loveliness of the younger;

all of which might occupy some half-dozen pages. Suffice it that the *Morning Post* and *Court Journal* were compelled to banish columns of irrelevant matter, and disappoint some dozen eager correspondents, to find room to do justice to the exciting subject.

From the hands of Lord St. Maur, the enraptured Howard received his bride; and close by the side of Minie, to whom she had acted the part alike of mother and sister, knelt one on whom alone, midst all that brilliant assemblage, the Countess St. Maur's thoughts were fixed; she saw, felt but for her; yet there was no expression in those gentle features, no movement in that graceful form, which could account for such anxious thoughts. Grave she was, and pale; but the impressive service in which her young sister bore a part so important, was sufficient to account for this; her whole soul was wrapt in prayer for Minie. If Howard's name mingled in those fervent orisons, if his happiness were besought, together with her sister's, was it marvel? Had they not become one, and could the bliss of one henceforth be perfect, distinct from the other? No! she looked upon the two, kneeling in their first and loveliest prime, beside the altar; it was her work, and she was strengthened to endure it.

The wedding-breakfast, which might rather have been termed a banquet from its splendor, was at Lord Edgemere's; his wife's persuasions having overruled Florence's desire that Minie should return to her house; the wedding-party would by such arrangement, Lady Edgemere urged, be so divided.

Woodlands had been prepared for Minie and Frank Florence had so earnestly entreated them to make that their home, at least for a time after their marriage, that they had willingly accedeo. At four they prepared to set off; and then it was, after changing her sister's bridal robe for her travelling costume, (the young bridesmaids having feelingly retired, to leave the sisters together ere they parted,) that Florence placed in the hand of Minie a sealed packet:—"Keep it, or give it to Frank's care, dearest," she said; "and a day or two hence it may afford you some little interest to examine it. Only remember

this: believe not, for a single instant, that its contents have afforded me a moment's regret, still less a moment's pain. Solemnly and sacredly I assure you that no circumstance in my whole life ever afforded me the satisfaction, the happiness, which was comprised in the signing of that packet. Tell this to Frank, and conjure him from me to believe this attestation, as if it had been given upon oath."

Minie had no time to answer, save by the tears, half of joy, half of timidity, which still kept her clinging to Florence, even after her toilet was concluded. Frank had come to seek her; gently he detached her from her sister's fond embrace, bore her through their thronging friends, and placed her in his carriage; but then for a brief minute he returned; he was alone with Florence, and he clasped her cold hand in his:—"Farewell!" he said with emotion. "Florence, we shall think of you in our happiness, and bless you for its bestowal. My sister now, God bless you, you will not refuse a brother's kiss." He held her to him, and printed a long kiss upon her cheek; the next moment he was gone. Sister! brother! the words thrilled through her, as spoken by some other voice than man's; the room began to reel round. But not then might she unloose the iron chain of self-control; she heard Lady Mary and young Melford calling on her name, as waiting to bid her farewell; and she obeyed the summons; she mingled with the world again, and not till eleven o'clock that night was she alone—ALONE.

* * * * *

"By the way, Minie love, have you ever examined that mysterious packet, which you told me Florence gave you just before you parted?" inquired Howard, the fourth morning after their marriage. Minie was looking, if possible, lovelier than ever, and superintending, with newly acquired dignity, the breakfast-table.

"Indeed I never thought of it again," was the reply. "And yet I ought not to have forgotten it, for Florence seemed so anxious that we should not blame her for its contents. What can it be? All deeds and settlements, and those disagreeable things, were concluded before we married, were they not?"

"Yes, love; so I hope and believe; but as to this packet our curiosity may easily be satisfied. Where is it?"

"In my dressing-case; Jane knows. Shall I ring, and tell her."

"No, Mrs. Howard," replied her husband, laughing; and putting his arm caressingly round her, as she half sprung up; "certainly not, while I am by to ring it for you. Will you never learn that you are a very important personage now—even a wife; and husbands, young ones more especially, are bound to perform such little offices. When I am old and gouty, you shall do them for me."

"I am afraid that I shall be much in the same predicament, Frank; and then what will become of us?" she said, laughing. "I will tell you," she added a moment afterwards; and leaning her head on his shoulder, she warbled forth with inexpressible sweetness two or three verses of that exquisite ballad, "John Anderson, my Jo;" so entrancing Frank, that the packet might again have been forgotten, had not the servant entered in answer to the bell.

At length, the important papers made their appearance, and Frank carelessly broke the seal, Minie leaning over him as he did so.

"Why, what in the world is this; a lawyer's paper? I thought I had done with all those annoyances," was his first exclamation. It had scarcely, however, escaped his lips, ere it gave way to another, in which wonder and regret were so intimately blended, that it was impossible to distinguish one from the other.

"What, after all, is it," simply asked Minie, "that can cause you so much agitation?"

"What is it, dearest?" he replied, much moved, "what but a deed of gift, making you heiress of Woodlands and all its extensive possessions, with the sole exception of a paltry five hundred a year, instead of your noble sister from whom it comes. All, all is made over to you, without a single reservation or clause, except that which I have named."

"Made over to me! Making me heiress instead of Florence: No, no. Oh! do not, pray do not let her

do so," answered Minie, entreatingly, when astonishment permitted her to comprehend the truth. "Pray, make her take it back; what can I want more than I have? If I had but you alone, with not a luxury of life, with only the home I had when my poor brother lived, I should be happier, richer, more to be envied than a crowned queen! What can I want more, my own dear, generous Florence? Do not let her make this sacrifice. Why should she have done it?"

"Why, my beloved? Alas! it is too clear now. This is the sacrifice which won my father's consent. You were made an heiress, and of course his prejudices were all removed. Fool, that I was, not to suspect something of the truth! Even if I were so mistaken in my father, as to believe for a moment he could have relented without some more powerful incentive than mere eloquence, there was something strange about the manner of Lord St. Maur and Lord Edgemere, which, had I not been a dolt, an idiot, must have awakened my suspicions. Noble, generous Florence! what do we not owe to her!"

"But can it not, in part, be recalled; must we permit the sacrifice, dearest Frank? How can I bear to feel the wrong she has done herself for me? Is there no way of eluding this deed of gift, of compelling her to recall it?"

"None, dearest; it is much too late now. See how long ago the deed was drawn up, and the signature affixed—ever since she made that hasty visit to London! Little did I imagine wherefore. And that Lord St. Maur and Lord Edgemere could consent, nay, encourage this, by becoming your trustees! What could have made them do so?"

"My sister's persuasions," replied Minie, sorrowfully—"their belief in her assertion that they more effectually secured her happiness by doing, than by preventing this. Oh, I know her so well! She never thought a moment of herself, except in encouraging the belief that every sacrifice, even in little things, was greater happiness than the doing of justice to herself. And she believes, feels all she professes: the message she gave me for you when you read this packet proves it."

"What message?"

She repeated it as it had been given. Frank was

deeply affected, and compelled to be convinced. The manner in which it had been accomplished, the absence of all display, all assumption in the sacrifice, the secrecy in which it had been carried on, did but enhance its value; although to generous natures, every individual benefit received at so heavy a price, must be intimately mingled with alloy.

We need not linger on the conversation which followed —how Frank longed to travel post to London, and speak with Florence, but was dissuaded by Minie, who intuitively felt that, to her sister's sensitive feelings, such a visit would give more pain than pleasure—how he at that very moment made the resolution that the first hour it was in his power, should he ever become Lord Glenvylle, he would restore Florence the heritage she had resigned. Both then wrote, pouring out all their hearts' eloquence, to Florence; and Howard giving vent to something very like indignation to both the trustees of his wife, for permitting such a sacrifice. With regard to Lord Glenvylle, Frank's emotions were almost all full of bitterness. We may here state, that in the very next interview he had with his father, Frank did speak much more reproachfully than his wont, but received little satisfaction from the doing so, except the conviction that, if the deed of gift had not been made, Minie could not, in his father's life-time at least, have become his wife. That this truth did much towards reconciling him to the acceptance of the sacrifice may be believed; but while it increased his veneration and regard for the bestower, it certainly could not soften his feelings towards the demander, or enable him more clearly to understand the latter's ever-incomprehensible character.

It so happened that Florence's unexpressed, but most earnest wishes were gratified. She did not see Howard and his young bride in the first excitement of their ardent gratitude. Frank had been appointed envoy extraordinary to the court of Hanover, on a mission likely to detain him there till autumn; permission for his bride to accompany him had been graciously accorded, but so sudden was the nomination, and its attendant removal, that notwithstanding all their exertion, to Minie's great

[illegible] they were compelled to embark without visiting [illegible], where Florence then was with Lady Helen: she [illegible] preferred returning to the country to remaining in [illegible] with the Earl and Countess, both being then much engaged, and before Frank and Minie had returned from Germany, Florence had left England.

CHAPTER LII.

ON THE SEA.—TO ITALY.—RESIGNATION.—A CHEERING RAY.

Gorgeously and majestically an August sun was sinking within the blue waters of the placid Mediterranean, the evening on which we resume the fast-decreasing thread of our narrative; blue waters in such an hour, indeed, they were not; for their unruffled, tideless expanse, gave back with fidelity, magnificent as the original, every glowing tint of the sunset sky. There was a stillness in the atmosphere, unconsciously whispering peace; and even when broken by the sounds of music floating from yatch or frigate—for it seemed to unite the characteristics of the two—the calm was rather deepened than disturbed. The little breeze there was filled the snow-white sails, and the gallant vessel scudded over the waves, leaving behind her a line as of silver to mark her onward track. She was evidently English built, and English manned, and from the excessive neatness of her decks, the beauty and order of her rigging, and those many nameless little things observable only in well-appointed ships, appeared the pride and glory alike of her captain and her crew. There was a gay, striped awning over the quarter-deck, where couches and chairs were scattered. A band of wind-instruments occupied the forecastle, ever and anon sending forth strains which called back dear old England, and the musical novelties of the past season. A group of young midshipmen, variously employed, now assembled midway, near the band; while other of the officers, and gentlemen of Lord St. Maur's suite, were indiscriminately scattered on the quarter-deck,, and, arm-in-arm, earnestly conversing

as they paced up and down, were the Earl himself and the captain of this gallant little frigate, Sir Ronald Elliott.

On one of the couches lay Florence Leslie, pale, attenuated, yet with an expression of such deep repose upon her features, that it seemed as if, indeed, the inward tempest had been stilled, and all was once more peace. No visible illness had attacked her since her sister's marriage, but strength and flesh had so dwindled, that she had been compelled to give up one employment after another, until at length she could not leave the drawing-room, save for her own apartment; yet so far was she from feeling ill that she had striven long with Lady St. Maur's desire to have advice, and only consented in order to please her friend. Sir Charles had recommended very easy travelling to another more genial climate, and a sea-voyage, could they but insure one of even temperature and without storms. Every one laughed at him but Sir Ronald Elliott, who instantly proposed fitting out a sort of frigate-yacht, which he would convey round to the south of France, where they might join him by very easy stages through that country; and a cruise on the Mediterranean, touching at those ports where there was any thing worth seeing; this excursion combining a residence for a short period in Italy, and, if still necessary, a further cruise in the Adriatic, would be, he was certain, more beneficial than any other change. Sir Charles warmly approved the plan, declaring it would be almost as good for Lord St. Maur as for Florence herself; for, however brave and strong the former might consider himself, he would be all the better for leaving England and her politics, and revelling for a time in all the *dolce far niente* of fair Italy.

It so chanced that Lord St. Maur could at that time easily obtain leave of absence, and, to the astonishment of all his friends, he was most particularly anxious to revisit Italy for a short interval.

Italy! would Florence indeed visit Italy? her birth-place, the land associated with so many day-dreams of her happiest youth; but now subject to almost of horror, associated as it was with the fatal secret of her birth. She knew not if the proposal were one of pain or pleasure; but the conviction that she had friends so anxious to re-

detention there, was on your account, I will not deny; but do not ask me more, for indeed I will not answer."

Frank looked at her doubtingly, almost sorrowfully; but playful as was her manner, it was too decided to be evaded. "Tell me but one thing," he said, earnestly, "dearest Florence; only tell me that to obtain this consent, so unexpected, from one like my father, you have made no sacrifice to which your friends can object; tell me," he rejoined, taking both her hands and looking full in her face. "Florence I must have an answer, if you would not destroy my new-found happiness at once."

"Be answered, then," she said; "I have both the consent and assistance of my friends in all that I have done. And for your father, judge him not harshly; I am sure he loves you—seeks but your happiness. Now, will you be satisfied," she added, smiling, "or must I name the portion I have settled on your bride?"

"Perish the thought!" indignantly burst from Howard. "I would that she had none, none but her own lovely face, and lovelier mind; that the world might know there is one heart that can enshrine affection without a thought of that hated frame-work—gold!"

The first dinner-bell sounding at that moment, saved Florence all reply, Many of Lady St. Maur's guests being eager to welcome and converse with her, it was no very great matter of surprise that she should leave Frank and Minie to their own happiness, and find a seat during the remainder of the evening elsewhere.

It was a joyous evening in the halls of Amersley. Frank was so universally beloved, that the ban being removed from his happiness was a source of real rejoicing. The hours sped in the dance and song; though both grated somewhat harshly on the feelings of the noble hostess, for she knew how they must fall on the heart of one in that lordly room. She looked towards her friend, often tremblingly; but there was still a smile on her pale lip, and her eye was radiant. Was it but excitement? or would indeed her noble spirit carry her throughout, and create its own reward? She did not dance; but for that her late illness was sufficient excuse, and it elicited no remark. Sir Ronald Elliott preferred remaining by her

side, defending himself against all the raillery of his companions by declaring the dance was too landsman and too savage an exercise for him; and Florence alternately conversed with him and others of the elder guests, with all her wonted calm and earnest manner, on various subjects, the whole evening.

The 25th of March had been fixed for Lady Mary's wedding-day, and Frank was eloquent in his entreaties that Minie would consent to become his on the same morning. Lord Glenvylle (to whom Frank had flown on the wings of gratitude the day following Florence's return) was anxious for the speedy solemnization of his son's happiness. Lady Mary and Melford seconded his entreaties, laughingly desiring the *éclat* of a double marriage; and Florence, when appealed to by her blushing and trembling sister, advised the granting her lover's request. It was not quite a year after their mother's death, but so near it that the pleading another month of mourning had little effect on Frank's impatience. The 25th of March, then, was the day fixed; and, as Lady Mary was to be married from her father's house in London, whither they adjourned after leaving Amersley, Florence determined on taking a house in town for the two following months, that her sister's elegant *trousseau* might be prepared together with Lady Mary's, and all things relative to her marriage be conducted with the refined taste natural to Florence, and demanded by Minie's future prospects.

Lord and Lady St. Maur expected to be in London about the middle of February, and directly after her sister's marriage Florence was to return to them. More than this Minie did not require, satisfied with her sister's assurance that she should not be lonely—that in all she had done she had secured her individual happiness as far as it lay in her own power. Vainly Minie remonstrated that the rich materials selected for her *trousseau*—the elegant though simple ornaments which Florence presented to her, were unsuited to her station.

"Unsuited, and you the sister of an heiress! about to be the bride of the heir to a Viscountcy. Shame on you, dearest. I will not permit you to dispute my taste. As long as you are under my roof, you must submit to my

soon found it was worse than idle to attempt it. No; I have done what I can, and I despair of effecting any alteration now. She will pass through life like too many others, reading novels and working Berlin wool."

"Unless she marries. If she could but come out of herself for another—in other words, really love."

"Love, my dear Florence! In your meaning of the word, Emily could never love. Had she been united, earlier, to some really worthy man, her character might have altered; now, even marriage would fail. She would never come out of herself, as you express it; and, unless she did so, as a married woman she might *exist* as she does now; but live happily and beneficially for herself and others, I very much doubt."

"And yet she seems to me to have had so little of real misfortune; it is strange that her life should be so cheerless."

"Hardly strange. It is almost a pity she has never had any thing like trial to encounter. Her education made her artificial; but I did once think she possessed the germ of higher qualities and powers; which, had they been called forth, might have made her a very different being. A single woman must often *make* objects of interest to prevent the too great ascendancy of self, and that requires intellect and, yet more, energy. With her sisters she has little in common, but her brothers are both superior young men, and their families might have been real sources of interest to her. It is not those who have endured misfortune, and endured it nobly, who are the most miserable themselves, or by whom the world is most darkly judged; it is those who vegetate like Emily, whose greatest solace is a novel, whose highest ambition is to be the first possessor of a new pattern for embroidery; who look on this beautiful earth as dark and sinful, and disbelieve, as romantic folly, all the tales of self-denial, high enterprise, and moral good, which they hear. Oh, believe me, dearest Florence—to you I may say it, for you must feel its truth—that real trials, nobly borne, are no subjects for pity; it is for those who fritter life away, as if it had no end, no goal, naught but the present pleasure, which flies ere it is clasped."

While such conversation was passing between the Countess and Florence—recorded only that our readers may not accuse us of entirely forgetting Emily Melford—another of more real importance to our heroine was engrossing the two gentlemen already noticed, Sir Ronald Elliott and Lord St. Maur.

"You do wrong, my good friend, indeed you do," the latter was urging, at the moment when we take it up, "to encourage such feelings after all I have told you; they can bring but misery."

"Misery! to love such a being, St. Maur?" was the sailor's impetuous reply. "Granted, that I do love alone as yet, that I am resolved she shall never know, never dream how I have dared to love, till she is in health and happiness; till there is a chance, however faint, of a return. What misery, what harm can there be in loving, when every thought devoted to her makes me a better and a nobler man? I feel a new creature since my wild dreams of woman's loveliness and gentleness and magnanimity, and a host of household virtues, have all found embodiment in her. Leave me to my heart's beautiful image, my good lord; to love such a being can never do me harm."

"All very fine and heroic, Ronald, no doubt; but yet I uphold that to encourage a feeling which I more than fear must be utterly hopeless, is more unwise than I gave you credit for being. Think you that you will always be satisfied to gaze and worship as you do now? Never long for more? and despair that more is not given, but always be content to worship, though to your divinity herself your worship is unknown?"

"St. Maur! I would not lose my present emotions, were they to be paid for by years of torment. I am no romantic idiot, though you look very much as if you thought me one; yet, believe me, I would not have that glorious creature suspect that I dare love her now—no! not for worlds. I could not meet her look of sorrowing regret, for, presumptuous as I am, she would give me nothing more severe. I should deserve to lose her, did I dare bring myself forward at such a moment, wrapt as she is in her own sorrows."

"You are a strange fellow, Ronald; have you learned all these high-flown notions on the high seas? If so, I will send my Cecil there directly he is old enough. Now don't look reproachfully! I would not jest with you on such a topic for the world; but do you remember all? I have told you much which would withhold many another man."

"What have you told me?—that there is mystery on her birth; and it may be that which the world brands with shame; and you believe that can weigh with me, can fling a dark shadow on the beautiful mind which that gentle form enshrines?—that I can think one moment on aught of mystery when I look on her, and see truth, purity, honor, gleaming up through the crystal of her heart as clearly as I have seen the rich coral-reef and golden sands shining through the still, blue ocean, though they lay full many a fathom deep? You hint that she has loved unhappily, and therefore I never can obtain the heart's first freshness, which my love deserves. Let her give me its regard, its confidence; I ask not *passion*, only affection. I will wait years, long years, I care not how long, so she be mine at last! That she is no heiress now, has resigned all but a mere pittance. Aye, it was that very deed which first awoke me into consciousness, telling me I reverenced—I worshiped her!"

"All very likely, and most eloquently expressed, friend Ronald; but it says nothing as to the wisdom of the thing. Your every word betrays that you do hope; and when I warn you that it must end in misery, you tell me it can not, as you are content to worship as you do now without hope—to love unsuspected and unknown; something rather contradictory, my good friend. However, lovers' feelings are always mysteries; mine were once, I suppose, though I found, to my cost, that loving without hope was not a thing to thrive on. I wonder if those madcaps yonder are fighting for love."

"Fighting! and in my presence!" exclaimed Sir Ronald; and still arm-in-arm with the Earl, he hastened to that part of the deck which we have mentioned as occupied by some young midshipmen, two of whom from a storm of words had come to a yet thicker storm of blows.

Sir Ronald's imperative voice parted them, and one, the

taller and evidently the more incensed of the two, slunk aside, as conscious of the weakness of his own cause; while the other a sturdy handsome boy, much his younger, stood boldly forward, crossing his arms on his chest, casting a contemptuous glance on his adversary, and meeting his commander's half-reproving look with a good-tempered yet respectful smile. He was silent, however, until Sir Ronald, finding it impossible to obtain a comprehensible answer from the elder, who stood twirling his hands together and shifting his feet in every position but that of a man, turned to him and demanded the cause of such unusual disrespect.

"Why, if you please, sir, Mr. Stanley there, chose to insult me, as not fit company for such as he, being you see a sprig of nobility, and I a poor lieutenant's son; and I, not quite comprehending such distinctions, gave him a good bit of my mind, which you see he did not like, and so it came to blows."

"And what did you tell him, my boy?" asked Lord St. Maur, laughing.

"Only, my lord, that I saw nothing in a nobleman more than in a gentleman, except according to his conduct; that if relationship to nobility makes the man, why I might claim the like, being connected with some lord or other, of whom I know not even the name—so much good his being a lord has done our family; and what's more, my grandfather disclaimed the relationship years ago, because of something or other wrong, which caused a change of name; and I would not give up mine, of centuries standing, for his new-fangled one and the title too."

"Most clearly, comprehensively explained, young man," replied the Earl, still laughing. "One thing only I can comprehend, that you are a fine high-spirited fellow, looking on nobility in its proper light, man making nobility, not nobility the man. You have the best of it in argument, and I rather think the *force* of it in blows."

The lad bowed respectfully, looking very much as if, however low his opinion of nobility in general, Lord St. Maur was an exception.

"Who is that fine youngster, Elliott?" inquired the Earl, as he resumed his walk with his friend.

"The grandson of as noble and free-spirited an old man as ever chanced to cross my path; he is a clergyman of Yorkshire, whose only daughter married a poor lieutenant, a messmate of mine, now disabled and retired, and living on half-pay with his wife and her father. He wrote to me, hearing of my return and promotion, entreating me to use my influence in getting a berth for his son, who was absolutely pining for the sea. To his father's great delight, I placed him under my own eye; he is a spirited fellow, like his father."

"But his name?"

"Philip Neville Hamilton."

"Neville!" repeated the Earl.

"Yes; after his grandfather, who, proud of his old family name, and always disappointed that he had not a son to carry it on, gave it to his grandson, who you have seen is equally proud of it. What he means by a lord and a new-fangled title, I cannot comprehend."

"Do you think he does himself?"

"I really cannot tell. But you seem agitated, my good friend! 'What's in a name?'"

"May be more in this instance than appears, Ronald. I am under a vow not to let any one who bears the name of Neville pass unquestioned."

Lord St. Maur's attention, once aroused, permitted no delay. Early the following morning Mr. Hamilton was summoned to his cabin, and a long private interview followed. Though apt and quick enough, the boy could not give all the particulars which were asked. He only knew that when he was longing to go to sea, his father had spoken to his grandfather about seeking the interest of some lord, with whom they were connected, but that Mr. Neville had solemnly declared he would not; he would rather see his family starve than have any thing to do with one whose conduct had been such that the very name had been dropped. That he (Philip) had been so excited by this conversation, he had appealed to his mother for further information, but she had told him little more. The very title he did not know; it had come into the family only some twenty or thirty years. That when there was a

chance of the succession, some near relation of his grandfather, uncle, or cousin, ashamed of the stigma attached to the name by the conduct of his son, the present lord, had expended an immense sum of money in changing it, and so all trace of the family connection was lost. So much his mother had imparted, with an earnest injunction that he would never allude to this nobleman again.

Lord St. Maur listened as one in a trance, feeling convinced that he had either actually heard, or vividly dreamed a tale like this before; he racked his memory till his brain ached, to discover where, by whom related, or to whom applied. Still, not to depend alone on his own reminiscences, he wrote to Mr. Neville, entreating him as he valued the chance of doing good, and restoring peace, to write to him all particulars of this little connection, if, as from Philip's words he suspected, he had once borne the name of Neville, who and what he had been, and what were his present name and title. This he placed within a letter from Philip, who told of his own accord how deeply, almost painfully, Lord St. Maur had been interested in the name, and then inclosed them both in a packet about to be dispatched to Lord Edgemere. In writing that nobleman's name, a flash of light darted through the Earl's mind, illuminating like electricity every link of memory. It was from Lord Edgemere he had heard a similar tale on the night of his return to England; and of whom had they been speaking? Lord St. Maur absolutely started from his chair in the strong agitation which the mental answer excited. Could it be? Was it possible? If so, with what infinite mercy had Providence interposed. It required an effort, even to his strong mind, while laboring under these thoughts, to retain his usual calm exterior before his wife and Florence. Yet he kept his secret even from the Countess, fearing to excite hopes which after all might not be realized. In his own mind, however, he felt convinced that, as very often happens, (though the skeptic world denies it, as visionary folly,) the simplest chance, in this case the quarrel of two boys, would unravel the painful web of mystery, which it had appeared only a miracle could solve.

We are wrong to say chance. In a government of love

there is no chance; a Father's hand rules our destiny, and turns even the most adverse circumstances (in seeming) to the furthering of His own immortal will.

CHAPTER LIII.

RETURNING HEALTH.—THE CASKET FOUND.

THE business with which Sir Ronald Elliott was intrusted by government (for he combined two things in this trip of pleasure) led him to Constantinople; and as he could not persuade his guests that Turkey would be infinitely more interesting than Italy, for a brief residence, he permitted them, after a month's delicious cruise, to embark at the nearest port to Florence, to which fair city they were bound, for thither, though she said but little, Florence's wishes turned.

Strength, as Sir Charles Brashleigh predicted, had partially returned; and the great benefit which she had derived from the sea-breezes, and continually changing scene, argued well for the hopes of her friends. Lady St. Maur, indeed, still in secret trembled; for to her affection it seemed, that the returning elasticity was merely temporary, and that Florence would at length sink, not from the terrible trials she had undergone, but from that dark and fatal secret, which, with all a woman's sympathy, she felt was crushing life beneath its weight. Lord St. Maur could not feel this, because hope was so strongly at work within him; young Elliott so entirely forgot it, except as rendering her in his eyes a being still more demanding love and cherishing, that he could not believe that it could weigh so heavily on her. Still, by neither word nor sign did he betray the devoted love which in reality he felt; though to a mind less pre-occupied, his almost reverential manner of addressing her, of superintending all the little kindnesses which could tend to her comfort, might have betrayed something deeper than mere regard.

The little party broke up with regret, only softened by the idea of their very shortly meeting again—on Captain Elliott's return from the Sublime Porte—when it would be decided whether they were to accompany him again to the South of France, or return to England overland. However he might believe that to worship as an unknown devotee would content him, Sir Ronald found that this worship, *apart* from its idol, was something very different to paying it in her presence. Yet he persevered in his resolution, that she should never know how she was beloved, till she was happy enough to be awake to the consciousness that she had yet the power of charming one in unselfish reverence to her side. She seemed to him as one too pure, too unearthly in her high and beautiful excellence, to be approached with aught of worldly passion, and so, though his limbs trembled with suppressed emotion, as he came to bid her farewell, every feeling was effectually concealed.

And at last Florence was in Italy! Was it the spirit of her own ill-fated mother at work, which caused her whole being to thrill with such a mingled sense of pain and pleasure that her feeble frame could scarcely sustain it, as she gazed on those scenes of nature, those exquisite models of art, which had been so long her day-dream? Who might answer? There are mysteries in the human heart, depths and capabilities of suffering and of enjoyment, which even their possessor can scarcely define, and how, then, may they be described to others? The Countess often wondered if the wish to visit the scene of her mother's last sufferings ever crossed her mind, but she never alluded to it, nor did Florence.

Lord St. Maur had departed on a private expedition, a week or ten days after their arrival at Florence, and on his return he found several dispatches awaiting him from England. It was easy for his wife to read in his features that his search had not been in vain, and that Elford's tale really had foundation; but the peculiar expression which attended the perusal of an inclosure from Lord Edgemere, was even to her penetration incomprehensible. It was speedily explained.

"Florence, I have news for you. Are you strong enough to hear them?" inquired Lady St. Maur, entering her

friend's boudoir the following morning, and finding her reclining on a sofa, resting from the fatigue of inditing a long letter to Minie.

"News, requiring *strength* to hear, dearest Ida? (Lady St. Maur had long since insisted that Florence should drop her title.) What can you mean? I can imagine no news of such importance, unless," she started up alarmed "unless you have heard more of Minie than I have. What of her.

"Nothing of her, you apprehensive being; besides, if it were, my news are of joy, not of sorrow!"

"Joy!—and for me!"

"Why, are there no news which can be fraught with joy for you, Florence? Think, is there nothing—nothing in the whole range of thought and wish, which you have lingered on, which, if discovered, would bring joy?"

"Nothing, but that which is impossible," replied Florence, despondingly.

"Do not say so, dearest, it is unlike your trusting faith to imagine there is any one thing impossible to Him who watches over us, till all things meet together for our good. Have you never thought, never believed, that your own poor mother had grounds for her assertion that her child's birth was as legal as her own marriage?"

"Yes, that she had grounds, perhaps proof to satisfy herself—but not the world, for even she might have been deceived."

"Do you remember in Mrs. Leslie's MS. that she alludes to a search for papers, which she imagined her poor friend had really obtained, but that none were found?"

"Perfectly; but I believe with my dear father, that it was merely the excitement of fever which made her thus speak—not actual possession."

"And suppose there really had been such papers, and by a most providential concatenation of circumstances they had been traced and found, and all mystery respecting your birth dispelled. Florence, dearest, I must be silent, if you give way to agitation such as this—"

"No! no! no!" gasped poor Florence, struggling with

the excitement which nearly overpowered her, "tell me all that you have learned. I am strong enough to bear it. Can it be, that after such a lapse of years, they can be discovered; that all may yet be revealed?"

"I bade you hope, my Florence, when I had little hope myself," replied Lady St. Maur. "Little to build on, but the words of my husband, narrating a curious tale which had met his ears in Italy, disregarded at the time, but recalled by the perusal of Mrs. Leslie's MS." She here related briefly that with which our readers are already acquainted, and continued—"Lord St. Maur did all he could to obtain further information of these young men. Elford he did not know personally; George Lacy, Elford's particular friend, was seized with a mania to travel all over the world; for my husband could not get a letter to reach him, until, I think, full eight months after his first attempt. Lacy's information only consisted in stating, that Elford was with his regiment in India, and not expected to return for four or five years. As this was the case, my husband felt there was little chance of his obtaining the papers, except by going to Italy himself. It was just about the time of Minie's marriage, and then there was little appearance of his accomplishing it. When, however, you became ill, and Sir Charles mentioned Italy and a voyage, as likely to restore you, he was quite as anxious to try it as Ronald himself, still hoping—a hope, I candidly own, I could not share—that the papers did exist and would be found. You sacrificed your own desire, to keep your fatal secret hid from all, in my favor, dearest Florence, that I might not be burdened with a secret which I might not impart to my husband; and to this sacrifice of self you owe a discovery, which, I trust, you will eventually own is fraught with joy. To tell you all in a few words—the Earl's secret expedition was to the source of the Arno, and there, true to both Mrs. Leslie's manuscripts and Elford's narrative, he found the village cure, the superstitious host, and the long-desired casket. So easily had every difficulty at length been overcome, that my husband had scarcely courage to examine the papers, fearing now he really had them, that they were not those he sought.

"But they were!—they were!" burst passionately from the parched lips of Florence.

"Dearest, they were even those very papers to which your unhappy mother's dying words alluded. It is clear that Madeleine, ill and suffering as she was, must have sought for and found the *abbé* who had united them, obtained from him the certificate of their marriage, and also a written document, proving, on oath, not only the truth and sanctity of his cloth, which in the wildness of her agony she appears to have doubted; but that a notorious fact concerning this Charles Neville, having met his ear, he had positively refused to marry them, unless Mr. Neville would take the most solemn oath, and bring papers to testify, that he was uniting himself to Madeleine Montani under his real name. This was done; papers signed to that effect were given to the reverend priest's care, who, in his simplicity, inferred the repentance of the bridegroom, and his pure love for his beautiful bride, by the little resistance he made to this proposal. Alas! ere the year was passed, the cause for this seeming submission was explained. Neville wrote to the old man, tauntingly and triumphantly, alluding to the compact he had made, but that it was idle and useless all; did he believe him such a dolt as to forge chains for himself which he could not break at his will? At the very time the *abbé* had united him as Charles Neville to the deceived Madeleine, he said his father was using every effort and expending large sums of money in changing the name, and that he had succeeded. Not alone was the name of Neville banished for ever, but a title was in prospect, and when obtained, what search, what claim could ever identify him as the husband of Madeleine, the father of her child?"

"But he acknowledged he knew she was his wife!" exclaimed Florence, strongly agitated. "Alas! alas, my mother! Yet this satisfaction was at least her own."

"It was. Her search for the Abbé Gramont was at least not entirely in vain. Convinced that she possessed these important papers, and unconscious that they had been stolen, she died, in all probability, so far happy; that she believed the friend, whom Providence had brought to

adopt her child, would have proofs of the legality of its birth."

"And you have the papers! You really have them!"

"Yes, dearest, close at hand. You can examine them when you will."

"And you and Lord St. Maur are convinced by them that there is no stain upon my birth? I may, indeed, go forth again like others? His name *was* Neville when he married?"

"To us there is not the smallest doubt remaining; there *can* be *none!* Other, and (though trifling) most convincing circumstances confirm this."

Florence sunk back, with such a fervent burst of thanks giving, that the Countess could not hear it unmoved. Every feature became irradiated; her clasped hands, her parted lip, her swimming eye, betrayed the full tide of joyous gratitude which was swelling in her heart, though, after the first exclamation, words she had none.

"You have more to tell me," she said at length, when her agitation subsided sufficiently to perceive that Lady St. Maur's countenance was still somewhat anxious. "What can it be, that it will not permit you to sympathize in the blessedness of this moment, as you did in former sorrow? Ida, dearest Ida, do you fear that because it has been revealed only now, that I can not be as grateful as I ought. Do you wish it had come earlier? Oh! wish it not; it must be better so, or it would not have been."

"And can you, in truth, *feel* this, my Florence? Can you still realize a Hand of Love in the eventful tenor of your life? Can you still believe that your adopted mother's prayer was granted, and that the misery you have endured was its reply? Florence, I ask not idly. Answer me only as you feel."

"And as I feel, I answer, my kind friend. Had not the fiery ordeal, through which it has pleased a God of Love to bring me, been for good, it would have been averted. Had it been for our happiness. I mean for Frank's and mine, that we should have become one, this discovery would not have been so long delayed. No! it is better thus. God in mercy heard my prayer. I can

look upon my sister's husband only as my brother, now; can feel that with her he must be happier than he would have been with me, or he could not so easily have loved again. I do not say I could always realize this, but that I can now, freely and thankfully. Love is past and gone—I will not say as if it had never been, because my heart has lost its freshness, but the object of its illusion is as completely banished as if he were one amongst the dead—perhaps still more so, for it would be no sin to retain his image then as it is now. Did I not give him to another? did I not level the barriers between him and his happiness? I say it not in ostentation, but only to convince you that if I could do this, if I could thus resign him, I should feel it sin to cease to struggle till I had conquered all of love."

"And you have done this?"

"Yes! If Frank were free to-morrow, and could feel again that which he once professed for me—make me anew an offer, I would not be his wife; perhaps the weaning myself from old thoughts, old feelings, was too deep suffering, to permit the idea of their return, without the fervent cry for help, that such might never be—I could not bear it."

"And no regret, then, mingles with this hour? Florence, my noble Florence, can human nature attain faith like this?"

"Yes, yes! believe it, dearest Ida. God tries us not beyond our strength, beyond that which he will give us help to bear. I know that the *wherefore* He has tried me, will be revealed in heaven; on earth, I ask it not, hope it not. It is enough that His love permits my feeling that He has willed it, therefore it is good."

"And if the *wherefore* should be indeed revealed to us on earth, Florence—my own Florence—think you you could bear to know the truth?"

"Bear it!" exclaimed Florence, once more springing up, and laying both hands on her friend's arm. "What can you mean? What have I more to bear?"

"Little of suffering, now, my Florence, but much to call for thanksgiving. Tell me, are you satisfied that your poor mother's death was happier than you thought; that no spot of shame can attach itself to you?"

"What more is needed? Is not that in itself sufficient mercy?" replied Florence.

"You would not, then, proclaim yourself his child, did you know that your father lived?"

"No, no! Oh! call him not my father; spare me that further agony," entreated Florence, pain suddenly contracting every feature which had beamed with such holy, such beautiful submission. "What can he be to me, or I to him, save as mutual objects of dread? And even if he owned me, my legal right might perhaps interpose between him and other offspring, believed legal now. No, no, let me be Florence Leslie still! No other name could be to me like that; no father like him who took me to his hearth and heart, when I knew no other, and no other would know me. It is enough we know the truth, why should the world know more?"

"Be calm, be comforted, then, my Florence; it shall be as you will," replied the Countess, fondly. "Nay, if it be such suffering, his very name you need not know."

"His name!" repeated Florence, wildly. "Gracious heavens! is that, too, brought to light? And was it this you feared to tell me? Feared! Yet why? What can it be to me?"

"Nothing now to fear, my Florence. What might have been, had those papers been a little longer concealed, or had you failed in that dread moment of trial, I shudder to think on. Is it possible you do not understand me?" she added, as Florence's large eyes moved not from her face, yet evinced no emotion but inquiry.

"Understand you? Yes—that Charles Neville is discovered; but you have not said in whom?"

Lady St. Maur did not reply in words; but she placed an open letter in her hand. Florence glanced rapidly over it. Her cheek and lips gradually became blanched to the color of her robe, as she proceeded. Her breath became impeded, till at length she felt as if every pulse suddenly stood still. Her brow contracted, her eyes distended, and though the paper dropped from her hands, they remained convulsively clenched, as if they held it still.

"Florence!" exclaimed Lady St. Maur, throwing her arms around her, "you are saved this intolerable misery Dearest, will you not thank God?"

Florence heard, and understood her. A grasp of ice seemed loosed from her heart and brain, and, throwing herself passionately on the Countess's neck, sense, and with it thankfulness, too deep, too intense for words, returned, in a convulsive burst of tears.

CHAPTER LIV.

REMORSE.

Lord St. Maur and his family remained in Italy nearly a twelvemonth; and though Sir Ronald Elliott could not prevail on them to return in his frigate to England, he did succeed in persuading them, before he left the southern shores, to take a cruise in the Adriatic, touching at all the far-famed Grecian Isles. The excursion happily confirmed the hoped-for improvement in the health and spirits of Florence. The Captain of course declared it was his much-loved ocean which had accomplished this good, although Lord St. Maur compelled him to acknowledge that she was materially better before the last cruise, and consequently that Italy had been as beneficial as the sea.

Be that as it may, the Florence Leslie who returned to England after an eighteen months' absence, was very different from the Florence Leslie who had left it. To the unspeakable happiness of Minie and Frank, there was no further appearance of gradual decay, and whatever might have been the sorrow which they had feared was consuming her, its every trace had passed away. The quiet happiness, the unruffled cheerfulness of former days had returned. She no longer shrunk, as Minie had feared she would, from witnessing the happiness she had done so much to heighten, but seemed to delight now in the society of those she had served; needing no other proof of gratitude than the continuance of their nurture,

confidence, and love, and their unwavering respect and affection towards herself. She promised them, as she could not quite grant their reiterated request to live with them entirely, that her home should be alternately with them and the Countess St. Maur. Minie and Frank assured her they wanted but this to complete their happiness.

"You have not seen Emily, then, since her engagement with Louis Camden?" inquired Lady Mary Melford of the Countess St. Maur, as they sat together one morning, some months after the latter's return to England. Lord Melford's family were still in Scotland, where they had been staying six or seven weeks.

"No, we missed each other completely, and I knew nothing of this engagement till quite by chance: Emily did not even write to tell me of it. Is it the same Camden she met at our house two or three years ago, when we were so anxious to discover the truth about Florence?"

"The very same: you know he became intimate with our families from that circumstance. Alfred rather liked him, but never dreamed of his being Emily's choice."

"Nor should I: some years ago he would have been the least likely person to attract her. Indeed, when we left England, I thought she would never marry; does she love him?"

Lady Mary laughed. "How can you ask such a simple question, Ida? did I not tell you some years ago, that love was out of fashion, though you and I were silly enough to fall into its trammels? Emily is now urged by the amiable desire of proving that she has a will of her own in opposition to that of her parents, who did not approve of the match."

"Why not? he is of good family, is he not? and I hear nothing alleged against him in the way of character."

"Character! he has none to allege any thing against. They will be happy after their own fashion, I dare say. Nothing in common, certainly, except indolence, which delightful quality will save them from the trouble of quarrelling. Louis will lounge away his mornings at the Horse Guards, Tattersall's, etc., as he does now. Emily

will furnish her drawing-room and boudoir with the most elegant Berlin work, which will occupy her some delightful years; perhaps for a change she may indite a fashionable novel, if writing be not too much trouble. She has read so many, that she might concoct one quite original in appearance, however borrowed in reality. Now, have I not sketched you a picture of true felicity, Ida? Do not laugh, it is true to life."

"Indeed it is much too sad for laughter, but your comic look provoked it. How can you talk so coolly of two persons entering into the solemn ceremony of marriage, taking a sacred oath to be as ONE, when they have no more idea of being so than they were before they married; going their own ways, seeking their own pleasures; in a word, living but for themselves, when they have sworn so to love one another, that self must be annihilated. It is dreadful!"

"My dear Ida, hundreds do the same; for ten that marry for love in this worldly age, I will find you fifty that do so without an atom of such romance."

"Perhaps so; but numbers in my opinion do not constitute either strength or wisdom. Better Emily should vegetate through life, as she does now, than marry with such feelings."

"Indeed, I do not think so. Matrimony may bring some cares and annoyances with it, and that will do her good. Their novelty will make them pleasures."

"A novel kind undoubtedly; but how do you know that she really does not love him as much at least as she can love?"

"Only by her telling me so herself. You may start and look disbelieving; but it is perfectly true, she condemns all love as the height of folly."

"Then why marry at all? particularly as by your account she is to work worsted and read novels just the same after marriage as before, so it cannot be for change of employment."

"Oh! but their is more *éclat* in what the honorable Mrs. Camden does, than in the sayings and doings of Emily Melford. She says herself that she marries for a change, to prove to her father that she likes her own will

better than his, and to take precedence of her sister at all the dinners and balls where they may chance to meet."

"Mary, you are uncharitable!"

"On my honor, I repeat but her own words. Imagine, should she have children, in what a capital school they will be trained."

"Children! Emily a mother, and of girls? unless she change very materially, of which I fear there is little chance, Heaven avert such a misfortune both to herself and them."

"Amen; if you speak so seriously, Ida, I must be serious too. You say 'of girls;' do you think a mother's influence is less felt with boys?"

"Only so far that they are removed sooner from her care; an indolent mother will dispatch her boys to school, almost before she has power to work them good or evil. Her girls remain with her under a governess perhaps, but that will hardly save them from the effects of example; and believe me, a mother influences the tender years of her children yet more by example, than by precept. In your case, dear Mary, I feel assured that your influence will follow your boy through life, babe as he is now, and little as you think you can do for him. You see I have read the thoughts which dictate your question, and I answer them in the words of Madame Campan—'Mothers more than schools are wanted to give us a nobler race of men.'"

"I ask but to make my boy like his father," was the instant reply.

Lady St. Maur smiled. "Conjugal love is not out of fashion then, Mary, though every other is."

"I told you we were exceptions, Ida."

"I am glad of it, Mary; but for your boy, if you do not wish him *better* than his father, you can make him *happier*, for Alfred had little of maternal influence to make him what he is."

"*Parlez d'un Ane et l'on vois ses oreilles*," said Lady Mary, laughing mischievously, as her husband and Lord St Maur entered at that moment.

"Which of us must look for his *oreilles* Lady Mary?" demanded the Earl in the same tone,

"Oh, not you, though Ida was speaking, do not flatter yourself it was about you. Alfred, as you were the *Ane*, have you no curiosity?"

"None at this moment. I have just learned tidings which have startled me. Lord Glenvylle has been thrown out of his carriage, and so seriously injured that there is little hope of his recovery."

A general start and exclamation followed his words.

"How unfortunate," remarked Lady Mary; "Minie has scarcely recovered the severe illness which followed her confinement, and I am sure is not well enough for Frank to leave her; she has been so attentive and kind to that strange man, and he has grown so fond of her, that the news of his danger will, I am sure, do her harm."

"The more so, as Lord Glenvylle had just left Woodlands in perfect health," rejoined the Earl.

"Woodlands! had he been there?"

"Yes, absolutely to see his grandson, to whom you know he insisted on giving the name of Leslie. His eccentricity showed itself even then. I wonder he left his retirement at all."

"And Florence, how is he with her?" asked Melford; "has she seen much of him?"

"Only since his visit to Woodlands. Cordial to women, you know he never is, and Florence rather shrinks from than invites his notice. He would, however, I have heard, distinguish her, as he has never forgotten what he terms her courage in seeking him, and her generosity towards his son."

"Ida, how strangely silent you have become; what are you thinking about?" inquired Lady Mary; but the Countess—a very unusual circumstance with her—could not at that moment reveal her thoughts, and evaded the question.

Melford's intelligence was correct. When nearing the metropolis, Lord Glenvylle's horses had taken fright, and, overturning the carriage, their master was so seriously hurt as to be conveyed insensible to his own house. Medical men had been instantly summoned, and pronounced him injured internally, and so severely as to baffle their skill. He might linger, nay, might recover,

but it was so doubtful, they would not advise any delay in sending for his family.

As Lady Mary had anticipated, the news caused Frank the greatest uneasiness. Delicate as she was, Minie could not accompany him, and yet she was most urgent to do so, declaring that his father ought not to be left alone, and so entirely dependent on his domestics. Frank felt the truth of her words; but he could not consent, her health was much too precious to be risked, and he would have departed alone, had not Florence conjured him with earnestness to permit her supplying Minie's place. She would go to his father, tarry with him till his recovery; and thus if the illness were lingering, permit Frank's occasional visits home, without any increased anxiety. If he thought Minie well enough to be left, her resolution was taken, she would go with him to London.

Minie's anxiety calmed on the instant of this proposal, and Frank, with real gratitude, acceded. All idea of Lord Glenvylle's dislike to her attendance was banished on their arrival, for a prey to incessant fever and delirium only varied by lethargic stupors, he knew none of those around him. Full of affection for his father, notwithstanding his capricious conduct towards himself, Frank's feelings were harrowed to a pitch almost of agony; not so much at the bodily sufferings which he could not alleviate, but from the unintelligible yet seemingly connected ravings of delirium. In vain Florence would conjure him to leave the apartment, or assure him there could be no meaning in the dark words he heard. He would linger spell-bound, and then rush from the room to pace his own, longing to disbelieve, yet feeling that he could not.

He had never dreamed of remorse and its attendant fears as actuating his father. His nature was too high, too pure to permit such thoughts as touching any one so nearly related to himself. He knew not of what he raved, save that it was evil; yet there were words which froze his very life within him, seeming, in spite of their madness, to explain much of what had been mysterious in his parent's life before, and he pondered on them till his brain reeled.

Meanwhile, day and night did Florence devote herself to the suffering man. He knew her not; yet her presence,

her gentle tending often appeared to soothe him when all else failed. When Frank had power to think, he implored her to take more care of herself. What claim had his father upon her that she should do all this for him?

"The claim of the suffering and the repentant upon the healthful and the innocent," was her instant reply; "Frank, there is satisfaction in what I do. Do not care for me, only for Minie's sake, for your child's, calm this frightful excitement; trust me, all will yet be well."

"Well! If there should be cause for what I hear. Florence, does he not rave that I—I, though his son, was not his heir? That there was a previous marriage, that then another may claim the name and the title, that it was for this I might wed with none but one who could bestow them. Title! What care I for that? but that I who so gloried in a pure line of ancestry, in noble birth, to add to the freedom and beauty of life, should find myself a nameless outcast. Florence, can this be well?"

She tried to soothe him, to argue that the ravings of delirium ought not to thus disturb him; but though for a time her efforts succeeded, whenever those fearful wanderings were renewed, Frank lost all power of reasoning, the very obscurity in which his parent spoke but increased the torture of his mind.

It was nearly morning. Florence had dismissed the watchers one by one, and as Lord Glenvylle seemed to sleep more calmly, remained at last alone beside him, unconscious that Frank, refreshed by some hours' sleep, had returned softly to the apartment, and shared her vigil, hidden from her by the curtain of the bed.

For nearly an hour all was perfect stillness, and she was just sinking into slumber, when those low terrible mutterings which were always the forerunners of the wildest delirium, startled her into wakefulness anew.

"Madeleine! Madeleine! Come you again? Have you not tortured me enough? Yes! yes! I know it. You need not repeat it so wildly. You married Charles Neville, and he deserted you. How dare you call yourself my wife? Am I not a Howard? Am I not Viscount Glenvylle? What has Charles Neville to do with me? I know you not! begone! I have no child but my poor Frank. You

shall not rob him of his heritage. I have hoarded gold, take it, and go! go! I will have no son but Frank! Son; have you a son? Why not come before? Why stay so long? Frank is too old now to give up his rights. He shall not, he shall not. It will break his heart. My boy! My own boy! Go! go I tell you! I am not Charles Neville now. I sought you, and you would not come. Why are you here now? Love me! Ay, ay, who ever loved like thee? My own poor Madeleine, and yet I scorned thee, trampled on thee. Where have you been this long, long while? I did not murder—murder? what fiend's voice spoke? Madeleine! Madeleine! come back to me; tell me I have no child, no son but Frank. You will not! you will not! Off! off! Fiends! Devils! Ye hold me with a grasp of fire—off! I will not go with ye! Off! off!"

The unhappy man had sprung up in his bed, his convulsive struggles demanding the whole strength of his son to restrain him on his couch. But though actually trembling lest the violence of his madness might do injury to himself or Frank, Florence called for no other aid.

For several minutes the paroxysm lasted, then gradually subsided as if life had indeed departed. Frank moved not; once only he spoke, and it was to entreat Florence to leave them; it was no scene for her.

"Florence!" gasped the dying man; "who spoke of Florence? They took Madeleine there to elude me, but she loved me too well for that, and she came to me spite of all they said, and how did I reward her? Fiend, fiend yet I did love her as I have loved none other—and her child—has she a child? No, no, no! Frank, Frank! I will have no son but him—no, no, none but you." He added, suddenly, fixing his dim eyes on his son's face, unconscious of his identity—"Frank, boy! good, kind boy, forgive me; I have wronged you. If another come to claim your heritage, let him have it! there is wealth enough for you; I have hoarded it, prized it, that I might leave it all to you. They cannot rob you of that, and you can take another name, and purchase another title, Frank, and forget that you had such a guilty father. Let the world talk as it will, what care you for them? My boy

my boy! do not curse me, I have loved you spite of all!"

"Father!" exclaimed the unhappy young man; "Father, in mercy cease, or speak more clearly. What have I to forgive? What have I to resign? If I have an elder brother, he is welcome to it all. Let him but come forward and leave me only a father. Say but that I am your own son, that I have equal right to bear your name, and for aught else—Father, father, tell me but the truth!"

"You may, you may! perhaps, perhaps! She died before your mother was my wife." And Lord Glenvylle sprang up again, the wild glare of his sunken eyes contradicting the apparent sanity of his words. "Frank, Frank! if after all I should have no other child, and they have tortured me for nothing, will you forgive me then? Yes, yes—you were always good and kind, and so, so they will punish me through you—see, she glares on me still? Madeleine! what do you there? Why do you kneel by my coach as if you would forgive? You can not, you can not! Only tell me that, that you have no child!"

Shuddering, and scarcely able to support himself, Frank's glance followed the wild gaze of his father, as if in the excitement of the moment he almost expected to see the being so apostrophised. He saw nothing but the kneeling form of Florence, on whose pale countenance the dim light of morning fell, giving it an unusual expression of languor and illness; her black hair was loosened, and falling thickly round her, increased the illusion. It was on her Lord Glenvylle's eyes were fixed, distending in their fevered gaze till they seemed about to burst their sockets. The convulsions of his frame ceased, his whole figure stiffened in his son's arms, his features grew rigid as stone.

"Madeleine," again he said in a faint and hollow voice, "this is no dream; no fever. Frank, Frank, does her child live? Is it a son? No, no, no, she is my wife—but you, my boy—" the jaw dropped, then came a gurgling sound, an appalling struggle, and all was over. They watched beside the dead.

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From dawn till past noon had Francis Howard, now

Lord Glenvylle, remained in his own apartment, refusing ingress to all, and leaving to the faithful steward of his father all the duties both to the living and the dead. There was something pervading his whole aspect as he disappeared from amongst them, which effectually secured him from intrusion. It was not till nearly two hours after noon that his own servant found courage to knock at his door, entreating permission on the part of Miss Leslie, and when Frank did fling it impatiently open, the man started back appalled at the change which a few brief hours had wrought. His brow was indented, his cheek haggard, his lip white and compressed, and the voice in which he demanded what he wanted, totally unlike himself.

The man was the bearer of a note and packet of papers, which Miss Leslie had a few minutes before conjured him to deliver into Howard's own hand. Frank took it, but carelessly threw the packet aside. The note was from Florence, containing a very few brief lines, but they had the power of making him impatiently motion the man away, and then seize the packet; hour after hour passed and found him engrossed with it still. The papers were of various sizes, and in different hands; yet one after another was perused with the same avidity, as if, notwithstanding their different appearance, they told but one continued tale. Frank's very breath seemed hushed; but could any one have witnessed the constant changes of his countenance, no more was needed to betray how deeply he was moved, or how nearly that which he perused concerned him. Again, and yet again, his eye returned to some particular passages, as if to believe from a first perusal was impossible; and it was not till twilight had gradually closed around him, that he looked up from the deep trance which his task had caused. The haggard look had faded from his features, the brow was unknit, the lip relaxed; the eyes were full and moist, as he raised them in the direction of the calm beautiful heavens; and his clasped hands, his parted lip, spoke inward thanksgiving and prayer.

"Frank Glenvylle! BROTHER," murmured a well-known voice beside him; "we may love each other still!" He caught her to his heart, and manly as he was, eschewing

weakness almost as a crime, his varied emotions were calmed in a flood of tears.

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"Yes, we will to Woodlands, with our dear Minie, as soon as may be," exclaimed Howard, after above an hour's quiet converse had calmed his excited spirit, and the elasticity of the young Viscount had returned, the more buoyant it seemed from its late stagnation. "A few days ago I felt as if I could not, ought not, to burden her with the sight of such a wretched being as myself. Tangible evil or suffering, I trust, I could meet as a man; but the bewildering doubt, the heavy apprehension of misery always hanging over me, which my poor father's words created, I could not bear. I felt as if I dared not meet my beloved wife or my innocent babe again. But now, now, Florence, my own sister—how blessed the word sounds!—again you have been the fountain of our joy. What had we been without you?"

"Oh, not mê, dearest Frank; our destiny, our happiness depended not on a weak mortal like myself for its fulfillment. What had we been without that merciful Providence, who out of such overwhelming evil, for so it seemed, could bring forth good?"

"But Minie, think you, we should tell her this wondrous tale? You shrank from the idea of imparting it; you tell me as loosening every tie which you so much loved. Do not think of us, but answer as you wish yourself, my sister. It shall be still, if you will, and forever kept a secret from Minie."

"No, Frank, no," was her instant answer; "let there be no secret between us, brother and sister as we are, which must be kept from one whom you have made my sister still. No, I can bear it now. We will tell it all as soon as she has strength for the excitement. No tie will be loosed now; nothing which can bring one thought of pain. Had there been no *cause* for you to hear it, then indeed I had never breathed the truth to mortal ear; for remember I am Florence Leslie still. I acknowledge no other parents than those whose name I bear. Keep these strange and painful records from the world, dear

Frank. None lives save ourselves whom they can in aught interest or avail, and therefore no injustice can be done by their concealment. Let Minie indeed know all, but tell it to none else. Oh! wondrously indeed has my adopted mother's prayer been answered. Dearest Frank, how may we sufficiently bless God!"

CHAPTER LV

A PROVIDENCE IN ALL.

Had we listened to our own wishes, gentle reader, our task had ended with the concluding words of the previous chapter, even though the fortunes of our heroine might have appeared unfinished—marriage or death being the general climax with which biography of all kinds, be it historical or imaginary, concludes.

It was our own earnest wish to have proved that a heroine might be happily disposed of without either one of these alternatives. But facts disposed themselves otherwise. That to a character like Florence, the life of a single woman would have been as happy, and as worthy of respect, admiration, and love, as the very warmest of her well-wishers could desire, we well believe; for we are not of the number of those who think that marriage, even a very happy one, affords the only chance of insuring felicity and the proper station to woman. We believe that it depends mostly on women themselves to secure their own happiness, and the respect and love of others, and that they can do this as single women as well as by becoming wives.

We do not deny that the task is difficult. To conquer the pain of loneliness and desolation, to subdue the natural yearnings for some nearer and dearer ties than merely those of blood, which, alas! but too often cool as years roll on, and our homes are severed like our interests; and those on whom the single woman would pour forth her warmest affections, give back but little in return, for they have dearer ties; that to be content with this, to *make* objects

of affection and interest, requires an energy—a strength of purpose, and, above all, a deep clinging sense of His cherishing love, whom we can not love too well, which feelings, perhaps, are not often perfectly attained; and therefore is it that we see single women but too commonly frittering away existence. Still hoping, still seeking for that eventful change in life—marriage!—when all change has long been passed; and their endeavors to be youthful, to neglect the duties of one station, in the hope of attracting for the other, loses them the esteem which a higher respect for themselves, and contentment with their lot, would unavoidably command. We hold all single women, who so know themselves and their duties, as to be revered and loved by all who call them relative and friend, in yet higher esteem and admiration than those happier ones, who have passed through life hand-in-hand with a beloved partner, fostered and fostering, blessing and blessed. For the wife, in all her struggles, all her pains, all her failings, all her virtues, has she not love to heal, to soothe, to shield, to encourage, to reward? For the single woman, where may she look, save to herself and to her God! How glorious the energy that snatches her from listlessness and trifling! How sainted the principle that shielding her from self, and its host of petty miseries and ills, bids her live for others in whom she has no wife nor mother's claim.

Yet to make a heroine sink into this, to endow her with no brighter destiny, would call down on the writer the charge of incompleteness and injustice. In vain have we urged that to one like Florence Leslie, the good performed, the misery averted, the happiness created by her acts of self-denial and devotedness, would be sufficient recompense.

"But why would you have had Florence suffer thus, and meet with no reward?" We think we hear some readers ask. No reward! Oh! is there none in the privileges just enumerated? None, in a life of virtue and its attendant faith, in a lovelier life above? And even if there were none, we would not inculcate the false doctrine that suffering must be followed by *temporal* recompense. It is a wrong, a misleading belief to look to this world for the reward of good; a mistaken moral to insist that the

adherence to the good, the sacrifice of self, the endeavor to realize the perfectibility of virtue, must find its recompense here below, or the economy of Divine justice is imperfect. Recompense there is, as incomparably above the deserts of even the most perfect upon earth, as the Gracious Bestower is above those on whom it is bestowed. But it comes not wholly in this world; we must look upward to receive it; and therefore do we urge that the moral of that tale is false, which would crown a life of trial with the dazzling lustre of earthly joy. Not that our mortal course is desolate. If our readers have felt with Florence, they have traced love gleaming up through all, and must acknowledge with her, that she had her reward even in this world. The "silver lining" was beneath the thunder-cloud, and the darkest misery brought forth joy.

Yet loving as she did, how was it possible that she could ever be happy or associate with the object of that love, discovering him to be her brother? The most probable thing was, that she should go mad.

Not so, captious critic! We are not of the tornado school, and can quite believe, though a woman can never love *twice*, as she has loved *once*, there is no occasion for death or madness to be her cure. Nay, we are sufficiently unromantic to believe, that passion may actually be conquered; and that by securing the happiness of those she loved, Florence went the surest way to work, and absolutely did conquer it, although at the cost of her own health and happiness, before the truth was known. We further allege, that as nearly two years elapsed between the discovery of the misery she had so narrowly escaped and her seeing Frank again, it was quite possible for her, when they did meet, to regard him only as the brother, which, by his marriage with Minie, she had before tutored her mind and heart to consider him. The horror which had seized her when the truth was first revealed, had, indeed been such as to terrify Lady St. Maur for her returning health, but her strong mind had conquered; and some time before they left Italy, every painful feeling had merged into quietness and confidence, gratitude and joy. She no longer shunned his image or his memory. Her very

horror of what might have been, and her constant gratitude that the deep misery had been turned aside, ever prevented the recurrence of any thought which could disturb her peace.

But did Frank himself ever know at what cost to Florence he had been saved from a doom, at the very thought of which he shuddered? Not from the lips of Florence. Neither he nor Minie, while they blessed her as—humanly speaking—not alone the creator, but the preserver of their joy, ever knew how painfully the first had been purchased. If a thought of the truth did ever flash across the mind of Frank, as when he recollected former suspicions of unhappiness, it might naturally have done, it was suppressed so quickly that it could never take defined form, much less expressed word; and he believed with his wife, that Florence's injured health and drooping spirits originated in her fatal secret alone. Minie's varied emotions at the tale she heard, we leave to the imaginations of our readers. Suffice it that Florence never had reason to regret that it had been imparted. Sisters, bound by no common affection, they had been from infancy, and such even through long years of marriage and maternity, they changelessly remained.

It is the fashion we believe, in the concluding chapters of a tale, as in the last scene of a drama, to bring all the *dramatis personæ* on the boards together. As, however, our characters are almost all disposed of, either in narrative or conversation, we must eschew the common mode, and briefly as may be dismiss those that remain.

To the world, the tale we have related, was never known, never even rumored. That the young Viscount insisted on settling half of his father's long-hoarded wealth on Miss Leslie, was, from his character, no very great matter of surprise. The sacrifice she had made for him, was cause sufficient, and so after the subject had been gossiped, exaggerated, and treated in every variety of light, it was dismissed to make room for those other matters of moment to the great, scandal-loving, busybody world.

To one other person alone, in addition to those whom we have named, was the eventful tenor of Miss Leslie's life revealed.

It was a lovely summer evening, rather more than two years after Lord Glenvylle's death, that two persons were sitting in one of the pretty little parlors of Amersley, opening on a retired part of the park. They had, it appeared by the lady's attire, been walking, but as their conversation deepened in interest, the repose and solitude of that little boudoir had been unconsciously sought, as less liable to interruption than either garden or park. The lady had thrown aside her bonnet, and as she sat, her face upturned to the gentleman, he standing beside her, though the features disclosed no positive beauty, they were such as arrest irresistibly, particularly when beaming as they were at that moment. Though the period of girlhood had merged into the epoch of woman's loveliest maturity, when one degree nearer thirty than twenty, she unites all the truth and freshness of early youth, with those calmer, more finished graces which have come not to pass away, but to deepen and endure. One glance on that open brow, that full dark eye, that finely-chiselled mouth, will suffice for her recognition by all those whose interest in Florence Leslie has sketched her image in their minds.

To the Florence of our first chapter, she bore indeed little outward resemblance, save such as the opening flower does to the early rose-bud. But even as the full-blown rose reveals the luscious scent and glowing beauty which the bud contained, although in part concealed; so did her character, as it now shone forth, confirm and perfect the promise of its bud. The timid, shrinking girl, was now the dignified though still retiring woman. The high and truthful sentiments which had formerly been spoken tremblingly, as scarcely daring to find expression, lest scorners should mock, or the more experienced should pity, were now avowed calmly, unostentatiously, as tney had been acted upon in the many trials of her life. The heart which had throbbed and quivered at the faintest word of kindness, and which a silken thread had led, if held by a loving hand, now rested on itself meekly and truthfully, contented with the love it gave, and the love it received. Living for others, indeed still; but feeling to the full that such existence was only living for her purer self.

Her companion appeared some two or three years her senior, tall and finely formed. A high polish and elegance of tone and manner marked at once the English gentleman, and there was, too, an honest frankness in all he said, which rendered it impossible to mistake his profession; but both their characters—as he stood leaning over the arm of the couch where Florence sat—had so evidently merged into the anxious lover, that they may be passed over with very little notice. Florence had been speaking long and earnestly, evidently narrating circumstances or feelings, to which Sir Ronald Elliott listened, scarcely breathing lest he should lose a word, though much of which she told him he already knew.

"You know all now," she said in conclusion, "more than any being on earth knows except Lord and Lady St Maur, more than I ever believed could pass my lips again Yet acting nobly, generously, as you have done by me, it is your due. I neither could nor would have become your wife, with any one circumstance untold. Of course, had not all love been previously subdued, the very fact of discovering who it was with whom in perfect ignorance and innocence my affections had become twined, must have banished the passion forever, even if to do so had caused my death, which, perhaps, had it not been conquered, must inevitably have ensued. But though five years have elapsed since then, and all love has passed away as entirely as if it had never been, save that I now shrink from its thought with such shuddering that I dare not, if I could, feel such emotion again; how may I hope or believe that a heart which has lost the sunny freshness of youth's first feelings, will bestow on you the happiness, which you tell me can exist but with its possession? Do not hesitate to speak those sentiments which my unvarnished narration may have excited. You cannot have known the facts before, and therefore have I so hesitated to accept the attentions you have lavished on me during the last few months. I longed for you to know the truth, believing that if known you must cease to value a heart which can give so poor a return for all the devotedness of yours."

"So poor a return!" he answered passionately. "Florence, call you truth, confidence, esteem, affection, however

calm and unimpassioned from a heart like yours, but poor return? Oh! dearer, more precious to me thus revealed than the first and freshest love of the loveliest on earth. You know not how for the last five years, aye, from the first evening I beheld you sitting in your deep sorrow in this very room at Ida's feet, I have borne your image with me, wherever you have been—though how might I annoy you with attentions, with words of love, when your thoughts were all fixed on other things. No, Florence, no. Lord St. Maur penetrated my secret, and to save me from the danger of unrequited love, he told me almost all you have revealed, save the name of him you loved; and yet I loved, aye, hopeless as it seemed."

"All! you knew all! even the doubt upon my birth! and yet you would have made me yours!"

"Yes, dearest! and those things they told me to diminish love increased it tenfold. What was to me the doubt upon your birth? Yourself alone I loved, aye, worshiped; for the deep sanctity your uncomplaining sorrow flung around you, permitted little of mere earthly passion to mingle with my love. What to me that you had resigned your heritage for the happiness of others, save that the very deed first woke me to the consciousness how unchangeably I loved! In the brief visit I paid to England, eighteen months ago, I looked on you again, and hope grew stronger, yet still I feared to commit my fate to words. I dared not ask you to be mine, lest even hope should be forever banished by your refusal. Again we met, I know not what bolder feeling awoke within me. You did not entirely reject attention; you did not refuse my companionship and sympathy. You spoke to me more than once as to one whose character was not wholly beneath your confidence and regard. Florence, my beloved, it was from these little things I gathered hope, for I knew I felt such conduct could not proceed from one who is truth itself, did she intend me to speak in vain. Forgive me that I did not interrupt you when you spoke, by avowing I knew all before. Your confidence, your truth, were too precious to be so checked. They told me that the esteem, the affection I pined for were my own, or you had not thus spoken; that as a friend, a husband,

dearest Florence, that confidence, that affection would bless me still. One thing only you told me that I did not know before; till this very day, nay this very hour, I knew not that the mystery of your birth had been dispersed, your real parentage made known. I can guess wherefore St. Maur withheld the truth, and I owe him the sincerest gratitude for so doing. I could almost wish it had not been so, that I might prove how little such thoughts could weigh with me."

"I do not heed such proof, dear Ronald, or rather you have proved it," replied Florence, with one of those bright glistening smiles that sometimes returned to her lip like the reflection of other days, and she made no resistance to the change in Elliott's position from standing to sitting by her side, with one arm most daringly thrown round her waist.

"And you will be mine, mine! in very truth my own," whispered the enraptured lover, looking upon the sweet face till it blushed beneath his gaze. "Mine, spite of all Edmund's long sermons as to the pure romance of what I felt—can it indeed be? I have dreamed of such bliss so long, it feels like a dream still. Speak to me but once, love; say but one little word, that it is no illusion: you will be mine."

"Yes, dearest Ronald!" she replied, simply and frankly, and her clear, truthful eyes shrunk not beneath his. "Six months ago I thought my destiny fixed, and thanked God for its calm and quiet joys; but with you, shielded by a love like yours, I feel, and have felt, perhaps, for the last month, that had I a heart worthy of the love you gave, I might be happier still. But there is one person to be consulted," she added, with a gay smile, perceiving, though Elliott was too much engrossed to do so, Lord and Lady St. Maur coming up the path to the glass door. "Not Minie, because she will be too happy to think I have a chance of being happy as herself; nor Frank, for the same reason; and I believe, could he choose a brother, he would have chosen you; not Lord St. Maur, but his and our Ida, who has vowed vengeance on any man who would rob her of one whom she flatteringly terms so useful a friend as myself. Go and use your eloquence

with her, dear Ronald, for wed without her consent I can not."

"I have no fear," was his joyous reply, springing from the side of Florence to that of the Countess, almost with a bound, and in a very few minutes they were all within the room; the Earl, grasping the Captain's hand with a most sympathizing pressure, and Lady St. Maur holding Florence in a warm embrace, whispering such affectionate congratulation that it almost brought forth tears.

"Yes, I will give her to you, Ronald," she said, "for your love does deserve her; and as your wife, I shall not only keep a friend, but gain a relative. If any one had prophesied this years ago, that my lowly flower of St. John's was to become cousin and dearest friend to that same Lady Ida Villiers, from whom the simple girl then almost shrank in awe because she was an Earl's daughter, and who afterwards suffered all kinds of sorrow rather than claim a friend in one she so foolishly loved, because rank and fortune came between us—if any one had prophesied this, I say, who would have believed it?"

"And if any one were to read my tale, dearest Ida, would they not scoff and say, that to friendship like yours the world affords no parallel; that it is pretty to read of but is never found? That one of your rank must have neglected, if she did not forget, one lowly as myself; that in the world, fashion not feeling must guide, and therefore none of your rank and station could be as you have been. Oh! you know not how your friendship aided in making me as I am. The world sees but the surface of life; it knows not what little things may influence and guide, and how much female friendship, in general so scorned and scoffed at, may be the invisible means of strengthening in virtue, comforting in sorrow and, without once interfering with any nearer or dearer tie, may heighten inexpressibly the happiness and well-doing of each."

THE END.

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